

## REPORT

---

# CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS: ORGANIZE & ASSEMBLE

The First Symposium of the Edmonton Branch  
of the Progressive Librarians Guild

by Stephen MacDonald

On Saturday, October 1st, the Progressive Librarians' Guild of Edmonton held its first symposium titled "Organize and Assemble" at the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton. The symposium covered a broad range of topics related to the important role that libraries, archives and information workers play in building a society that values greater social justice, equality and openness.

The day began with opening comments from Toni Samek, professor at the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta. Ms. Samek stated that this was the first symposium of its kind held in the Edmonton area and is a significant contribution to promoting social justice in the library and archives community in this community and abroad. During her brief introduction, she spoke about the history of the progressive library movement, the Progressive Librarians Guild, its new chapter in Edmonton and how it is contributing to this movement.

The first presenter of the day was Braden Cannon, archivist at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. His talk "The Canadian Disease: Re-Thinking LAM Convergence" focused on institutional integration in the LAM sector. This is defined as the merger of libraries, archives and museums one organization with a single administration. During this presentation, Cannon identifies the arguments that have been made to support the reorganization of libraries archives and museums as one organization, including the need for professionals in these organizations to "adapt to changing times and customers needs", they function in the same social, legal and economic contexts, the idea that users do not care how they receive information and services that these organizations offer, and the emergence of the digital landscape is driving the LAM convergence.

These arguments are problematic because they fail to take into consideration the unique characteristics that distinguish libraries, archives and museums from one another. In addition to this problem, employees in libraries archive and museums aren't always consulted before such mergers take place. As a result, the concerns of front-line workers aren't taken into consideration, increasing the possibility that the organizations can't properly deliver services. Also, by placing too much emphasis on delivering services that

the public wants, these organizations do not value the essential services these professions provide, such as preservation of historically-significant artifacts and archival papers.

Cannon argues that convergence is the result of the corporatization of libraries, archives and museums. These merged organizations adopt corporate business models where they are asked to demonstrate to their funders their value. Their funders see them as having social-historical value, but as a series of organizations in the cultural heritage sector competing for reduced cultural heritage funding, created by the public sectors obsession with fiscal constraint and taming deficits.

Cannon also describes the corporatization of library/archive and museum education programs, providing the example of the iSchool consortium. These schools place too much emphasis on information technology and library service-courses, decreasing the variety of courses for those interesting in pursuing archive and museum studies programs. Like LAM, they place too much emphasis on justifying their existence to their funders and not enough on providing future librarians, archivists and curators with courses that provide them with the education they need to take on these positions.

To prevent convergence from continuing, Cannon argues that we must encourage collaboration between libraries, archives and museums on specific projects, such as historical websites and digitization projects. These initiatives will only work if the various organizations work together and have an equal stake in the project they're working on. Integration fails to achieve this goal, which must be discussed more.

The second presentation was entitled "Lord Save Us From the Et Cetera of the Notaries" and featured Raymond Frogner, archivist at the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, BC. His paper focused on the juridical application of oral tradition and archival records as related to First Nations rights in Canada. Frogner noted that contemporary jurisprudence is premised on western principles of trustworthy evidence that relies on archival records to make informed decisions in legal cases. He argued that we are in a period similar to the Enlightenment, as new interpretive frameworks are challenging archival and jurisprudential convention and our understanding of authentic evidence and that new paradigms are required to address how multicultural societies, modern bureaucracy, and information technologies are fragmenting the concept of a reliable record and decoupling the record from the traditional provenance of a single, definitive creator. In fact, Frogner argued, even the notion of a single, definitive creator of a record is becoming an historical caricature. Nothing more completely encapsulates these contemporary archival challenges than protecting, over time, Aboriginal non-textual cultural heritage – the meaning of custody, instantaneous reproduction and distribution, fixity of form, stability of content, heterogeneous and collaborative authorship, authenticity reinterpreted. But unlike electronic records, this topic has

not received the same degree of study and so we remain posed with an ongoing problem: traditional concepts of trustworthy records, built on absolutist conceptions of sovereignty and textual paradigms, cohere poorly with the oral testimony of Aboriginal memory and the cultural history of apportioned governance in Aboriginal societies.

The presentation also focused on recent Supreme Court of Canada decisions on Aboriginal rights and examined how non-textual, Aboriginal custom becomes evidence in the Canadian court. Frogner drew a comparison between how contemporary Canadian courts are struggling with challenges similar to Enlightenment French jurists who transformed unwritten French custom into the Code Civile. Within this comparison the paper concluded that new paradigms are required to recognize evidence of Aboriginal custom and how this serves to provide support for Aboriginal rights in Canadian courts.

The third presentation featured Moyra Lang, project coordinator with the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada at the University of Alberta. Her talk looked at how libraries have the goal of developing an inclusive environment for all, but fail to deliver adequate library services for transgendered individuals. This is because of their tendency to treat their information needs as the same as those of for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and those who question their sexual orientation.

After discussing her interest in this topic, she reviewed terminology she would be using in her presentation, making distinctions between sex and gender-based terms. This discussion also included terms associated with transgendered people, who are mistakenly labeled as part of a community with gays, lesbians and bisexuals. To demonstrate the difference between sex and gender, transgendered people and members of the former groups, Lang tells the story of an American swing bandleader who identified as a man but was found to have reproductive organs typically associated with men.

Lang argued that while libraries aim to be inclusive by developing library management and collections policies that acknowledge the importance of providing quality library services to all groups in our communities, some of their policies make transgendered individuals feel unwelcome. Lang discusses the public library's growing interest in creating LGBTQ collections. While this appears to be inclusive, these collections assume that all groups represented in LGBTQ have the same needs. Transgendered people have needs that greatly distinguish them from bisexuals, gays, lesbians and individuals questioning their sexual orientation. She argues that public libraries must address this reality and begin purchasing more books that satisfy the unique set of information needs that transgendered individuals have.

Lang then goes on to discuss the Edmonton Public Library's policy of asking patrons for their gender when they register for a library card. This

area of the registration form allows users to select male or female, or other. This discriminates against those individuals who are in the process of transitioning from male to female, or vice-versa. Lang mentions that trans individuals have been denied library cards because they are in the process of transitioning from male to female or vice-versa.

This discussion made it clear that in order for libraries to do a better job addressing the information needs of transgendered people and to make these community spaces more welcoming to this group, we must set aside our biases and outdated understandings of transgendered people and be willing to adapt our policies and service attitude to provide this group with adequate library services.

The fourth presentation of the day featured Kim Bewick and Amanda Bird, community librarians with Edmonton Public Library. Their presentation “Connecting with Communities: the Community-Led Service Philosophy at Edmonton Public Library” focused on the work that community librarians do in Edmonton to improve their relationship with the community and design library services and programs that meet the specific needs of marginalized groups in the community that have a history of not using public libraries. Inspired by the Working Together program, which created community librarian positions in socially-disadvantaged communities across Canada, Bewick and Bird explain that community librarians in the Edmonton Public Library system achieve these goals by going into the community and working directly with individuals and community organizations to learn more about how the branch library can best serve their specific needs.

After providing some general information about the role of community librarians in the Edmonton Public Library system, Bewick and Bird and provided examples of individuals and organizations that they work with in the areas of Edmonton they are assigned to. During this discussion, they discussed how they have developed stronger relationships with specific groups and individuals in the community and the social impact of their work in disadvantaged communities.

The presentation identified a series of challenges that most community librarians in the system face:

- Some of the individuals that community librarians have been working with have had negative library experiences (i.e. being banned for bad behavior, overdue fines, etc.), making it difficult for them to trust librarians and the institution as a whole.
- Community librarians have difficulty serving some members of the public because they are homeless and as a result do not have identification they can use to obtain a library card.
- Some community librarians feel overworked because most branches in the system only have one community librarian. This problem is being addressed by assigning Library Assistants to

help community librarians work on projects that they are involved with.

- Language barriers also make it difficult for employees to communicate with members of the public that could benefit from services that community librarians provide.

While these challenges exist, Bewick and Bird make it clear that community librarians have had a major impact on the community. Since community librarians began working for the library system in 2008, they have worked with over 260 agencies and organizations in Edmonton. Their efforts have also led to a 63% increase in the number of programs and outreach initiatives delivered by the Edmonton Public Library system. This demonstrates that public libraries in our city are doing more to be inclusive community spaces that provide for all Edmontonians, regardless of their socio-economic background.

The fifth presentation of the day involved Tanya Driechel, Moyra Lang, Liz Fulton-Lyne, and Kim Bewick, who are all members from the Greater Edmonton Library Association's Prison Sub-Committee. Their presentation "Books Behind Bars: Community Development in Prison Libraries" provided information about the committee's work to help build the library at the Edmonton Institution for Women, the only multi-level women's prison in Western Canada. During the presentation, they talked about the origins of the committee, as well as various projects that they have worked on to help improve the institution's library and the services they provide. The members of this committee identified a wide range of valuable programs that are enjoyed by many of the inmates at the institution. They include the library's book club, their collections management initiative, which involves weeding the collection and donating books to non-profit organizations in Edmonton, the library's writing circles and zine creation workshops, and the storybook project, which involves mothers in jail reading a book aloud and recording it to a CD so their children can read along to this recording. Although the committee has faced some challenges, including the institution's resistance to the committee bringing book readers into the institution for the inmates, the program has been a great success.

The presentation ended with a brief documentary that features inmates from the prison talking about their positive relationship with the prison library and the services it offers to them. The documentary helped conference attendees learn more about specific library programs that were discussed during the presentation.

In the final presentation of the day titled "Knowledge Mapping of Social Responsibility in an Information Intensive Society: A Proposed Taxonomy), Toni Samek and Ali Shiri, professors at the University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies, discuss the work they have done so far on a taxonomy they are designing to classify library and information studies projects that are directly related to social justice issues. They strongly believe that all university students, including those studying library and

information studies deserve to be exposed to social justice issues during their studies. This taxonomy would be used as a valuable teaching tool that would help classify discourse on social action in the LIS discipline. They also noted that while there are taxonomies that are associated with human rights and social justice, there is no such controlled vocabulary that is designed specifically for LIS projects.

To develop the taxonomy, Samek and Shiri reviewed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for terminology they felt would belong in the taxonomy and other literature associated with social justice projects. This information was used to develop ten high level facets that would be used to classify such projects. These general headings included activities and operations, communities, issues, people and other related headings. Smaller, more specific headings that address certain types of LIS projects associated with social justice are being added to each facet.

While Samek and Shiri are the main researchers for this project, they clearly stated that they are interested in hearing from the library community about terms that could be added to this taxonomy or any suggestions they have to build upon this controlled vocabulary. This shows that this is a grassroots project and will reflect the collective knowledge of information workers.

Braden Cannon's closing remarks were a reflection of the excitement in the room created by the symposium's interesting presentations related to LIS and social justice. During his brief speech, he mentioned that the conference demonstrated that information workers in Edmonton and other parts of Western Canada are interested in using their positions to help bring about progressive social change in our own communities. It also demonstrated that our growing progressive library movement is becoming more organized and is developing the momentum needed to achieve this social change. Cannon closed by referring to the symposium's title, arguing that to be an effective social movement, we must continue to organize and assemble so we can come up with solutions that put an end to social injustice in our communities and beyond.