

In the Library with the Lead Pipe

The murder victim? Your library assumptions. Suspects? It could have been any of us. http://inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org

Out of the Library and Into the Wild

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Librarians out of the library and into the rain at the 2006 Boston Pride Parade. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

Librarians and library school students have a lot to gain by sharing their skills with groups outside of the library, such as community organizations, social justice groups, and non-profits. By building coalitions and offering support to different groups, librarians help lend their particular expertise while simultaneously advancing the roles of these groups. These projects help increase the visibility of librarians and libraries. When we leave the library and enter the wild, we build our professional and personal relevance and bridge connections with socially and politically minded groups.

Librarian skills are broad and varied, and cannot be neatly categorized in an acid-free, archival box. A master's degree in library science, information science, or some hybrid of library and information science (LIS), develops varied skill sets and career possibilities, such as: reference, management, technical services, user instruction, human computer interaction, and scholarly communication advocacy. Plus there are a number of specializations available, like archives, school media, librarian leadership, etc. Therefore, there is no one skill set to which I'm referring as being optimal to share outside of the library, or no one type of LIS professional to share them. For purposes of simplification, in this article "librarian skills" refers to the skills one picks up in library school, library jobs, or, more generally, in the LIS field.

There have been a number of articles referencing the importance of librarians expanding their own skills by attending conferences and professional development activities in other fields, such as Bonnie Swoger's piece Why Academic Librarians Need to Stop Going to Library Conferences and Hilary Davis' Déformation Professionnelle. I agree that attending non LIS professional conferences is something we should be doing, and concur that part of what makes us more skilled at our jobs, particularly in academic libraries, is fluency in current trends and developments in the subject fields we

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support. By contrast, this piece argues that librarians should take their librarian skills to other professions and other organizations outside of LIS. With this, we are turning the tables on what the other articles have argued, because the librarians are the skilled experts, sharing their knowledge with other groups and professionals.

Why share?

Between September 2009 to September 2010, about 62.8 million Americans, or roughly 26.3 percent of the population, volunteered their time to groups including religious organizations, educational or youth services programs, and social or community service organizations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Did you volunteer, and if so, were you volunteering librarian skills? As librarians, we have a particular expertise which can help advance the mission of groups we personally support. By volunteering with groups we want to work with, we align our professional skills with our personal values. Denise Pasquinelli, an Education Product Designer with her MLIS, describes her experience helping Bitch Magazine create a community lending library. "I deeply value being a facilitator of education and the human right for free and open access to information. When given the opportunity to create a special collection library for an organization that values empowerment, equality and feminist values — the decision was a no brainer!" (D. Pasquinelli, personal communication, March 5, 2012).

Simultaneously, these partnerships help to increase our skills and visibility as a profession, as well as increase awareness of what libraries offer, which are both visibilities needing to be increased. "Part of the problem is simply that most activist groups do not consider libraries as strategic access points for filling information needs. This attitude is recurrent and circular" (Schuman, 1987, 130). Melissa Morrone and Lia Friedman follow up this statement by placing it in current context that "now with the Internet and Web readily available to most, the influence of libraries – and, by extension, librarians – is even more tenuous for social justice activists" (Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 386). Our active participation with these groups as librarians helps show the versatility of our profession. By meeting people outside of the library and in the groups of which we are a part, we are helping them while also gaining supporters and advocates for libraries and librarians. When we build these connections, we build up each other's communities, and we put faces on the name of our profession and strengthen our networks for when we need help and support.

Contributing your skills and therefore feeling valuable can be affirming for the individual contributing the skills. One needn't look far to confirm that service and helpfulness are librarian job requirements. The American Library Association lists "enjoying helping and serving others" as the first quality to being a librarian (American Library Association, 2012). The library and information science honors society, Beta Phi Mu, motto translates to "consumed in the service of others" (Beta Phi Mu, 2012). Many librarians enjoy the feeling of being helpful and sharing their expertise with others, and these associations often give you ample opportunities to get the warm fuzzies about helping out. One librarian explained the joy she finds by being a skilled librarian as "I enjoy the 'Florence Nightingale' aspect of being a help" (Julien & Genuis, 2009, p. 931).

Volunteering librarian skills not only feeds the soul and psyche, but also can help build your experience and your resume. The current job market is challenging for most to secure steady employment, especially for recent graduates from LIS programs (Bonfield, 2011). Volunteer partnerships, though likely unpaid, help one build skills and work experience, as well as demonstrate ingenuity and innovation. Ideally, some of these partnerships may lead to jobs, whether for the group with which you are volunteering, or through a similar group to which they recommend you. Perhaps by putting a face to librarianship and recognizing what skills and value librarians bring, organizations may recognize the need for a librarian and hire one. Regardless, these partnerships can help develop your skills and

provide valuable experience that will be desirable to future employers.

Who is already sharing?

One of the primary groups providing librarian assistance in non-traditional places is Radical Reference. "Radical Reference is a collective of volunteer library workers who believe in social justice and equality. [They] support activist communities, progressive organizations, and independent journalists by providing professional research support, education and access to information" (Radical Reference, 2004). Since its inception in 2004, Radical Reference has grown to become an international group that has a number of autonomous collectives around the country, who participate in various projects and actions, either virtually or in person. Radical Reference members "take their skills and values in evaluating resources and bring them to the social justice communities of which they are part" (Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 374).

Street reference and protest support is what first prompted Radical Reference into existence. Radical Reference began in 2004 in New York City to provide in-the-street reference to protestors at the Republican National Convention. Librarians came prepared with ready reference kits that included information on diverse topics, such as information on one's rights if he or she is detained, synopses on what people are collectively protesting about, and information on where the closest bathrooms are (Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 372). Preceding this, Jessamyn West of <u>Librarian.net</u> provided in the street reference at Burning Man and the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999 (Edwards, 2006).

One of the traditional ways librarians have contributed skills outside of library walls is by helping groups create their own libraries. Michelle Budt-Caulk wrote an article about volunteer librarians for *American Libraries*. In it, she write about her positive experience bridging her skills with her personal values when she helped her church establish a lending library. As the only trained librarian volunteer, she became the resident expert and notes that a side benefit of volunteering is the personal gratification. "It doesn't get any better than this – utilizing my skills in a profession that I love and getting many thanks for it" (Budt-Caulk, 2006, p. 38).

In Portland, Oregon, Radical Reference members helped Bitch Magazine develop a community lending library of feminist and pop culture texts. Radical Reference members worked with the non-profit magazine staff to understand their needs and vision for the project, and with this information created a system for how the library should be organized, cataloged, and housed. They also set up a system with documentation that could be easily translatable to future Bitch volunteers staffing the library, who may not be trained as librarians. Debbie Rasmussen, the former editor of Bitch, said that Radical Reference "brought skills and expertise that none of us here at *Bitch* had... We were pretty lost until they arrived! ... It's brought new meaning to the work we do because we'll finally have a way of connecting more directly with the community here in Portland, on top of connecting with an amazing group" (Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 392).

Just down the road, other Radical Reference affiliated librarians have been volunteering for years helping create and run the Q Center's <u>LGBTQ lending libraries</u>. Ismoon Hunter-Morton, the Q Center Librarian, began volunteering on the project in 2008 when her former partner, also a Q Center volunteer told her there was a growing queer book collection that needed some attention. Since then, the library has grown from 500 books to 2,500, which are all cataloged online and will soon be circulating. Ismoon's volunteer job duties have included "soliciting book and archival donations, recruiting and organizing volunteers, holding library work-days, advertised via Facebook and conference presentations, and cataloging the library in [Dewey Decimal Classification] specifically tailored to LGBTQ culture and

user-needs." She has also "helped people look [for] information on sensitive topics such as marginalized sexualities and genders, domestic violence, resources for parents of trans children, and discrimination within our queer and allied communities" (I. Hunter-Morton, personal communication, March 7, 2012). Amanda Meeks, another steadfast Q Center Library volunteer and LIS graduate student at Emporia State University joined Ismoon after learning about the library while organizing Emporia LIS student's annual library prom, held at the Q Center. She reached out to Ismoon and began volunteering and focusing on readying the collection for circulation by both writing policies and guides, and physically preparing the materials and leading other volunteers in preparing the materials. Amanda speaks very highly of her experiences volunteering at the Q Center Library, and writes about how her experiences volunteering in the library connect her to the larger GLBTQ community and its history. "I've never truly felt like an activist until I started with this project; it has been incredibly rewarding to work with Ismoon and the wonderful volunteers that we've found. I feel that queer librarians are making bigger waves in our profession than ever before and I am happy to find time amidst my studies to add some momentum towards progressive practices and rectifying the history and past invisibility of GLBTQ communities" (A. Meeks, personal communication, March 7, 2012). Ismoon has since gone on to build connections with other radical community libraries and has created an annual Radical Library Crawl, which includes participation from radical book artists, self-publishers, and librarians, such as Street Books and the Independent Publishing Resource Center.

Presenting informational sessions or teaching workshops at non-LIS conferences is an excellent way to bring librarian skills to non-LIS groups. These workshops can be anything from tips on researching particular databases, or free sources relevant to the subject matter of the conference, or teaching about copyright and fair use. If you see a need in another field's professional development that you have expertise to fill, do it. Radical Reference members have taught fact checking workshops at Grassroots Media Conferences and Women, Action, and the Media Conference. Arpita Bose and Melissa Morrone, librarians in New York, taught a free workshop at the Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn on finding consumer health information with freely available and public library resources. For Arpita, she found volunteering in a way to continue performing a librarian skill she no longer exercised in her job, while also connecting with the community. "For four years I had worked on a contract with the National Library of Medicine to provide training to librarians and members of the public on health information resources, and I missed the public service aspect of that job. Leading a workshop at the Coop seemed like a great way to contribute to the community" (A. Bose, personal communication, March 1, 2012). Radical Reference collectives have also taught workshops at book fairs and skillshares, including community needs assessments, archival best practices, filing successful Freedom of Information Act requests, and navigating copyright.

Library school student groups have been key allies in sharing librarian skills with different groups. There are currently twelve Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) student chapters at different library schools (Progressive Librarians Guild, 2012). Many of these groups have volunteered with the creation of alternative library spaces, such as the zine library Papercut in Boston. They have also collaborated with prisoner support groups, such as Books through Bars and the Prison Book Program. Some of these groups have organized field trips to visit radical and alternative libraries and archives in their communities – helping to create bridges into these organizations that could lead to future collaborations. Students from different LIS programs have helped build or consult on websites for external groups. Additionally, these library school groups help to provide a space where progressive students may gather together to have space to collaborate and bring discourse to their schools through group events and speaker forums.

As mentioned earlier, sharing librarian skills can help to build community. In the spirit of coming out of the library, a group of librarians in Boston marched in the Boston Pride Parade, carrying signs saying

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things like "Librarians are Novel Lovers" and "Can I help with your reference queery?" While marching is arguable as a "librarian skill," solidarity actions like these help to bring awareness to the profession and connect us with diverse communities. Similarly, tabling at community events, as Radical Reference has done, help to raise awareness of librarians and librarianship and embed us in the communities we serve and are a part of. These bridges help to present an authentic portrait of the diversity within the field and break down stereotypes of what librarians are like.

When we volunteer with other groups, we can also simultaneously build community amongst librarians. Ismoon Hunter-Morton writes about how volunteering with the Q Center in Portland, Oregon has provided her with a network of librarians and library students with similar interests. "I love working with queer and allied library students and librarians because we have created a network of people in the area who are committed to library service to marginalized communities and to continuing the tradition of librarian activism, providing free information to people who need it most" (I. Hunter-Morton, personal communication, March 7, 2012). Community building can also be created through a shared affinity, such as that of libraries and baked goods, as occurred for Kate Angell, a librarian in New York who began baking vegan treats for volunteers at Occupy Wall Streets' People's Library (Angell, n.d.). Similarly, student LIS groups at graduate schools such as Simmons College, Pratt Institute, and University of Pittsburg have organized and hosted skillshares where fellow library school students and librarians share their librarian skills with each other.

Perhaps the most potent contemporary example of contributing librarian skills to a movement is seen in the various Occupy libraries that have sprung up around the country. These libraries have received national news coverage, including a New Yorker post, and an article in the New York Times about the Audre Lorde to Howard Zinn Library (A to Z) at Occupy Boston. In addition to collecting and cataloging lending collections, Occupy libraries have built subject guides to popular topics, organized community events, helped publish poetry anthologies, and answer reference questions. Archivists are working to catalog the ephemera related to the movement – such as signs, newsletters, photographs, and media. And in a great display of meta-librarian-ing, Occupy librarians presented at ALA Midwinter, about the librarian skills they used in creating these alternative spaces (Rapp, 2012). Now Occupy libraries are working to build an Occupy Consortium, where libraries can share resources and support each other. Heather McCann, one of the organizers at A to Z explained her experience with the Occupy Boston library as "transformative." She continues by writing "we came together, many of us strangers around a common interest: providing information to the people of Occupy Boston. For me, I knew that I wanted to be involved with the movement, so I thought about how my skills could be of the greatest use. Fortunately, the other Radical Reference librarians, some Simmons students and a few others had the same thought... We frequently heard that the library tent was one of the most welcoming places at Occupy Boston" (H. McCann, personal communication, March 7, 2012).

How do I share my librarian skills?

Hopefully you are feeing inspired to take your librarian skills out of the library and into the wild. How do you prepare for such a journey? While there is no one way to line up this adventure, there are some travel considerations for making the journey easier. First you should consider whether you are traveling solo, or whether you will feel more comfortable taking a group trip. If you want to travel as a group, connect with LIS groups that are already serving the community, like Radical Reference or even the closest PLG student chapter, and find out what projects they are currently involved in. Or, form an affinity group of like-minded librarians interested in similar projects. Another place to look for groups and people working on similar issues is on ALA Connect, the American Library Association's online community.

Next, think about which groups in your community, or online, align with your personal politics and

convictions and reach out to them to see what sort of skills they may be in need of. Reach out to these groups and market yourself by being clear about what you can bring to their organization and ask what their needs are, since they may not know what librarians can offer. Do they have a need for research, archiving, needs assessment, or any other sort of skills that you have? Ask what they need help with. If what they really need help with is stuffing envelopes, and it is not a good fit for you, politely decline and find other groups whose needs match your skills. Or, if the project that they need help with is something that you do not currently know how to do, but you know someone who does, see if you can recruit her for the project; if you work together you can simultaneously gain new skills through this collaboration.

You can turn to websites like <u>Volunteer Match</u> and <u>Idealist</u>, which help connect people with non-profit volunteer opportunities. Or try reaching out to your social networks through websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, to find out which groups and projects your friends and colleagues are working on that could use some librarian skills. Perhaps you can meet a group in need of librarian skills at a non-LIS conference, skillshare, or other community event. You can participate in events like Librarians Build Community at ALA Annual, where volunteers have helped rebuild libraries in New Orleans, following the damage from Hurricane Katrina. Another effective way to integrate this work would be for organizations like ALA's Emerging Leaders program to expand their projects to include work with clients outside of the library world who may need assistance by librarians.

Effective partnerships are symbiotic, providing personal fulfillment for the librarian while providing necessary skills and expertise for the organization. When we share librarian skills with different groups, we promote and support social causes, as well as promote ourselves. It is critical for our relevancy as a profession and as professionals to make these bridges and enhance our skills, and we can have a lot of fun in the process. Every time we step out of the library and into the wild, it becomes a much more welcome place.

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