

“THE LIBRARIAN AS THE GUIDE BY THE SIDE”

The Librarian as a MENTOR

Librarians today are a unique hybrid! Partly “grammarians” of yesterdays [as the earliest leaders of the Ptolemaic Library of Alexandria were] and partly “information specialists” [operating within the general set of IT/IL specialties], Librarians are still playing an important role in educational and other knowledge-based organizations. Their special training in “information classification” and proper “information retrieval” guarantees their continuous utility at present and in the future. Moreover, their further knowledge of particular fields – many librarians hold a second Masters degree (or equivalent) besides their MLS – makes them competent intellectuals, receptive to particular demands in courses of various disciplines. Although it is true that Librarians do not teach their own courses on the basis of the old disciplinary divisions, one should not consider this a demeaning handicap. Indeed, as the world changes, the traditional role of teachers seems to be changing as well --- in the direction where the Librarians’ roles are found. This message has been trumpeted time and again by a host of educational reformers and commentators. The “talking head” model, we are told, is passing! In its place emerges a new model of case-based, project-based, collaborative, interactive model in which the role of the teacher is quite different. It is the role of a “mentor,” a “guide by the side,” not of a “lector,” or a “record player.” Strangely, that is more or less the role Librarians perform daily in the integrated multi-media Library environment.

Here is what Librarians do routinely as mentors:

Librarians teach “library & information management skills.” Various professors assign “projects” for their own individual classes on any conceivable topic and the Library becomes the “hands on” classroom for research and the completion of projects. A librarian’s contribution to students’ preparation for the “end-of-the-job” era consists of the following:

1. Teaching them basic search and retrieval skills in the old (books, periodicals, videos) and new (Internet, databases) environment. This process involves ‘mentoring’ their individual searches, guiding them through the maze in the initial steps (see, for example, some such guidance found on my College web page), and suggesting interdisciplinary and comparative linkages (examples: parallel myths, literature and mythology, comparative legal systems, comparative statistics on nations, diverse resources on the topic of “revenge, etc.)
2. Helping them to “add value” to the existing information base: by cross-analyzing information, facilitating teamwork where possible (which is, nevertheless, primarily the teacher’s prerogative) for the creation of further value-added, and giving and receiving feedback relevant to the project. We have also started to encourage the electronic posting of the results of such projects.
3. Mentoring the students regarding the management of their specific project and their time; students need to become aware of the various steps of their project, the time needed for each step, and the allocation of extra time for contingencies. Procrastination, oversimplification of the project, and ‘text-only’ thinking are unwanted traits in the new era.

4. Problem solving help also involves “suggesting connections,” “linking electronically to specialists” (their web pages and by email), and “incorporating comparative and global viewpoints” (for example, the “opposing viewpoints” perspective extended internationally).

As the students select a topic to research and follow the sequential steps of: accessing information, selecting titles, retrieving them, evaluating sources, writing the thesis statement, moving gradually from idea to essay, documenting titles, and, finally, citing them according to established rules, they learn logical ordering and project/ information management.

But researching for ‘available’, let alone ‘desirable’, sources of information existing in multiple forms (printed or electronic, books or periodicals, special encyclopedias, etc.), reachable by a variety of routes (by author, subject, area or discipline, even by similarity), involves critical decision-making and selection of intelligent shortcutting routines. These skills are, of course, required in the Collegial educational process and are extremely important in the Information Society of our times as well.

That is the core of a Librarian’s contribution to the development of the critical thinking and the multifaceted skills of the students.