What was the most useful thing you learned during your library education?

Welcome to the inaugural Roundtable topic! This section is a chance for librarians to reflect on their own practice and experience by examining a particular question. We seek commentary from librarians in all areas with all levels of experience. The Roundtable topic for this column is: What was the most useful thing you learned during your library education?

Stay tuned for announcements on forthcoming Roundtable topics. You may also suggest a topic for a future issue by contacting the Professional Development Editor, Jessica Lange (jessica.lange@mcgill.ca).

Sarah Macintyre

Since I graduated with an MLIS from McGill University in 2012, my studies are still fairly fresh in my mind. When I think back to the courses I took, I tend to reflect more often on the courses I wish I had taken (a course on grant writing would have been helpful!), rather than on those that were most valuable to me. I believe that my personal experience is one that resonates with many of my colleagues: upon entering the workforce, you face a steep learning curve as you feel like you are flying by the seat of your pants every day. Having said that, there were several courses that were key in preparing me for my career, such as the Web System Design and Management course. Before taking this class, I had never really thought about how a website is built, and while the topics covered were introductory, the course really provided me with a strong foundation (which came in handy, as one of my first projects in my current role included a website redesign!). Another course that was valuable to me was Information Literacy. Although I don't do classroom instruction in my current role, I do a great deal of training with both staff and the public, as well as public speaking engagements. This class helped me hone my abilities as a teacher, and to practice my presentation skills. Finally, and perhaps shockingly, I found the introductory Knowledge Management course very useful. Since I work in a public library, you may not think I use a lot of KM skills; actually, I manage our staff Intranet and shared drives, and being able to create functional information retrieval processes is key.

Beyond specific courses, I think that some of my most valuable learning experiences from library school included the opportunities to network with professionals. The library community is always happy to share information, knowledge, experience, procedures, and practices; the School of Information Studies really highlighted this. One of the messages that stuck with me was "sometimes good enough is good enough." As professionals, we often strive for perfection, and try to make sure that every project we take on is well thought out and fully-developed before even getting it off the ground. Unfortunately, this type of over-preparedness can mean that we never jump right into

the deep end. Sometimes, perfection isn't achievable, and planning can only go so far. The takeaway? Don't be afraid to take risks! That new program you've been agonizing over for weeks? Call it a "pilot project" and start today! You can always go back and evaluate it, and make changes as needed. As a student, the professors and professionals I looked up to the most were those who weren't afraid to try new things.

As a librarian working in a public library today, I strive to tackle challenging projects and take (calculated) risks. I believe that this outlook is directly impacted by the types of professionals I encountered during my library education.

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The most useful thing I learned in library school was how to correctly use Library of Congress Subject Headings and Canadian Subject Headings, both from the perspective of a cataloguer and as a reference librarian.

Working in cataloguing for several years gave me a great appreciation for the intellectual rigour that is applied in assigning subject headings, as well as the stringent process for introducing and defining new headings. Organizing the field of knowledge requires the expertise of a professional, and automatically-generated terms do not successfully convey nuances in meaning or the many facets of a topic represented in a published work.

Now that I work in reference services, I still use LCSH and CSH on a daily basis, but from the discovery side of the catalogue. I am constantly reminded that many researchers employ a keyword search strategy only; our clients are frequently amazed and impressed by the invariably richer results that I and my colleagues are able to unearth from the library catalogue.

Learning and exploiting these tools, which are the backbone of librarianship, has served me well in my career so far; in a library environment where the default is keyword search, a professional who is able to assist researchers in drilling down to their subject more systematically is indispensable.

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The most important thing I learned in the MLIS program at Dalhousie University was how to be an effective researcher. I took the thesis route through the program, my topic being "An Examination of the Information Resources Preferred by Physicians." At that time, the push to evidence-based medicine was just maturing, so these were important questions for developing new ways to use technology (think PubMed) to help get medical evidence from the lab to general practice faster. Librarians were not just indexing Medline any more: we were finding better ways to push the information out 'just-in-time' to where it is needed.

The important thing for this conversation, however, is not the topic of the thesis but learning the research process itself. Developing a question that is meaningful and can be answered, creating a sound methodology, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing valid conclusions are skills many feel they know intuitively, but are learned only through practice and discipline. The discipline to complete the process without bias or shortcuts, and to finish what you have started, is often difficult to acquire. Also, the ability to take criticism without shame and use it to maximize your research is incredibly important. Until I learned to replace the word "criticize" with "maximize," I routinely allowed others' review of my work to bring me down. Now I anticipate feedback as the most important part of a process that will help make my work the best it can be.

Rather than continue in academics, I chose to be a practicing librarian and to bring those research skills to the workplace. I spend a good amount of time thinking about the work we do in libraries and how to do it better, hopefully to ensure a more meaningful and rewarding experience for our clientele. This means being able to examine library operations, practices, and policies without bias, ask those meaningful questions, and answer the questions in a way that can directly and positively affect management decisions.

I have found there are many librarians from all different types of libraries who feel the same way about research. Some don't have the institutional support, experience or the means to conduct research themselves, and their isolation often negatively affects the momentum of a research project. In June of 2015, we began a [research support group](#) (RSG) under the umbrella of [Libraries Nova Scotia](#). The RSG is meant to help raise the bar on the amount and quality of library research in Nova Scotia. The plan is to include resources like grant-writing tips and information on getting published; mostly, the group is meant to act as an informal peer review environment, where members can ask questions to the group, present their work for feedback, or get help brainstorming through some methodological problem. My hope is that other places in Canada will start their own groups for the same purpose.

Solid research can make our organizations smarter and better. And peer review is not just for academics. In fact, rather than being viewed as a painful exercise, peer review should be seen as a positive process of growth that helps make us all better.

If I were to give any advice to students I would say that learning effective research methods and skills might be the most important thing you can get from your MLIS. Even

if you don't do a thesis, taking research methods courses and making the most of your opportunities for smaller research projects will help you hone skills that are incredibly valuable to the profession, very transferrable to various workplaces, and personally rewarding.

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Throughout the duration of my undergraduate studies (I majored in music history while studying piano performance on the side), I was rarely expected to complete academic work as part of a team. Any papers submitted were meant to challenge us as students to demonstrate our knowledge independently, while work in groups was reserved for ensembles and rehearsal rooms—separate from the classroom experience. While I certainly find my music history training did prepare me in many ways for my current career, the MLIS program was where I really began to learn how to work in a team in an academic environment.

Where does teamwork fit into the academic library work environment? I've found that most of my work happens within a spectrum of collaboration with my colleagues: in some cases as formal partnerships or mandated teams, and in other cases through informal support or discussion. Though there are many of ways teamwork applies in the academic library, here are three examples for consideration:

1) Professional practice. Being a faculty member means participating in collegial discussions and processes. Much of this work relies on a group to make decisions—coming to consensus but also raising and discussing complex issues. Similarly, there are ongoing committees, teams, and working groups tasked with a specific function or goal in mind, working to progress various library projects. In his article "The changing role of subject librarians in academic libraries," Stephen Pinfield identifies teamwork and project working as two areas of increased responsibility for subject librarians. This can happen in one of three ways: as part of librarian-only teams, as part of multi-disciplinary teams, or as managers of subject-based support staff. In all these cases, Pinfield (2001) suggests that "the subject librarian needs to be aware of team building and team working practices" (p. 37) in order to ensure success.

2) Research collaborations. In my workplace, research is expected as part of the process toward tenure and promotion. Being able to collaborate with others on these research projects can present both benefits and challenges. Maha Kumaran (2015) outlines some of the benefits in a recent article "Collaborating

for research: Experiences and lessons learnt:" "Collaborative research when done well can be a rich and rewarding experience. Researchers learn to problem solve, gain new knowledge and skills, and ultimately have a strong project published in a high impact journal" (para. 7). As a new faculty member, working in a research group can be a great way to gain experience, learn more about how to engage with a field of research and get familiar with the publishing process.

3) Team teaching. As the domain of information literacy continues to develop, there seems to be an increased need for librarians to collaborate on teaching. Whether this means coordinating a program of library instruction, co-teaching a class with a faculty member, or developing course content with the help of a campus teaching centre or instructional designer, there are many ways that teaching in libraries is no longer a solo activity. In the end, sharing resources, skills and expertise has the potential to benefit student learning in profound ways.

These are just some examples of ways that my work as an academic librarian occurs collaboratively and in teams. Although I didn't fully know it at the time, learning to work in groups while doing my MLIS was great practice for the workplace, where I continue to enjoy working and learning from my colleagues in the field. Since moving into my role as a librarian at the University of Saskatchewan, I've had the opportunity to continue this learning through leadership development programs, where teamwork and collaboration continue to play vital roles.

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References

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