

Back at the coalface

John Levett in his Front Line of the 25 March issue of *inCite* quoted Geoff Allen. Speaking at the 1000 Australian Libraries Summit, he thought 'that a periodic return to the coalface to "get their hands dirty" would be salutary for library educators.'

As a library educator, I could take issue with Geoff by saying that there are plenty of opportunities to get dirty hands in a library school. However, that is not the point of this contribution. I have, unwittingly as it turns out, taken his advice, and, for 12 months, have returned to my original vocation as a reference librarian, this time at the University of Sydney. This has taken the form of an exchange with Joseph Meloche, who is doing my job as a lecturer at Curtin University for that same period.

To a person, those who have heard about this arrangement have praised the concept and many have urged me to let others know about it. Does it work and should it be encouraged? The answer to both these questions is *yes*. The realisation that many of the developments, particularly in the fields of information technology, had been introduced into Australian libraries since I had left practice for education, prompted this move. While one can gain a lot from the literature and by talking to practitioners, understanding and credibility must be increased by actually *doing* the task.



Malcolm Traill — at Sydney (pro tem.)

While it is not unknown for library educators (particularly in the USA) to take sabbaticals to work in a library, I felt that, if an exchange could be organised, it would give an opportunity to a practitioner to may like to try teaching, without making a long-term commitment. The ALIA conference in Perth last year provided a chance to meet Joseph and to finalise the arrangements.

From my point of view, the exchange has been a great success. The willingness of my temporary employers to give me a breadth of experience by encouraging me to set my own

agenda; the challenge of a new city, library systems and personnel; the 12-month period which allows me to actually feel productive and not just a spectator; and the knowledge that all I do during my term in Sydney should be beneficial to my students in years ahead.

Some say, and I agree, that I was fortunate to find an exchangee whose interests and responsibilities are similar to my own. However, while Australian library schools have traditionally found it difficult to recruit staff, a chance like this to try teaching without losing the security of a practitioner's post should be attractive to many more. It should also eventually improve the quality of library education throughout the country, and will also provide variety in an otherwise static job market.

I can also see possibilities for other cross-sectorial exchanges such as this. What about an exchange between a systems librarian and product vendor, a serials librarian and subscription agent, an acquisitions librarian and bookseller? While a full 12-month exchange may not always be appropriate, a chance to shadow counterparts in the commercial world (and them, you) should also be possible with a reasonable amount of goodwill. Now that ALIA has the added 'I', these types of links should be encouraged and pursued. Is anyone interested in 5 years' time?

Malcolm Traill

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