



A useful trade

From the desk of the Library Provocateur

In the last weeks of my final undergraduate year at university, I was confronted with a stark economic reality – in the depths of the recession Australia had to have, BA degrees were one-way tickets to unemployment, John Birmingham-like share houses, and fringe theatre. With my predilection to cashmere scarves, the cleansing properties of Toilet Duck, and quiet evenings in with the cat, it was not a future to which I looked forward.

And so, with the piggy bank for sale by tender (all reasonable offers considered), I could afford another year of study. What was it to be – a one year graduate diploma in something respectably ‘professional’ like teaching or librarianship, or Honours and the long, dusty path to academic penury?

At this time I was invited to afternoon tea with a newly appointed Oxbridge don, keen to have me in his Honours program. It was all very flattering, and the chocolate biscuits were top shelf. Alas, I explained, my piggy bank has suffered the effects of near double digit inflation and I must go forth into the grubby world of commerce – albeit via a quickie ‘Grad Dip’ in Librarianship. The sage man nodded his head quietly, cleared his throat of biscuit crumbs, and uttered the words that have haunted me ever since: “Librarianship, yes, that’s a useful trade.” My mind filled in the blank: “For a lady.”

I won’t name the academic in question – he will be known to many of us, especially colleagues in the west – but his words proved prophetic. Librarianship has been, for me, a useful trade. Yes but, I hear you splutter, we are professionals – we belong to a profession. Librarianship is a profession!

My rejoinder is, perhaps. As my career has unfolded, I have become less certain. Finding workable definitions of ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ is actually harder than most of us realise. Many occupations now style themselves as being ‘professional’ – the appellation has become a marketing tool for everyone from real estate agents to dog walkers.

To define a profession, I increasingly turn to the definition provided by Professions Australia, a peak body representing 27 member associations:

“A profession is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others.”

The membership of Professions Australia is revealing and includes dentists, accountants, vets, actuaries, radiographers and, heaven forbid, management consultants. It also encompasses records managers and members of the Australian Computer Society. Librarians, however, are not represented.

At a glance, librarians and library technicians would appear to fulfil all of the criteria defined by Professions Australia. Somewhat like the Guild Navigators of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, we possess a discrete body of knowledge and skills derived from research and training at a high level, and apply them in the interests of others. Unlike the Guild though, most of us can do it without recourse to mind-altering substances.

Furthermore, librarians and library technicians are governed by ethical standards. Yes, for those who may have been unaware or simply forgotten, all ALIA members are supposed to be committed to a core set of values and ethics. Good luck finding them on the ALIA website but here’s a hint: look under “About ALIA” then “Policies”. Search under “Membership” and you will be hard pressed to find any references to values, ethics, or standards.

Here for me, and Professions Australia presumably, is the real test of professionalism. Their definition concludes:

“It is inherent in the definition of a profession that a code of ethics governs the activities of each profession. Such codes require behaviour and practice beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual. They define and demand high standards of behaviour in respect to the services provided to the public and in dealing with professional colleagues. Further, these codes are enforced by the profession and are acknowledged and accepted by the community.”

That final word, community, is critical and implies a higher level of social engagement and public trust than would be expected of say, a real estate agent – regardless of how ‘professional’ they might style themselves in the media.

Much of our collective effort as a profession is currently focused on advocacy, and we have rightly been galvanised by the Australian Government’s quixotic proposals for community ‘cyber-safety’ and internet filtering. ALIA’s work in this regard has brought it great kudos, and with good reason.

However, without explicit reference back to core professional ethics and values, we run the risk of being dismissed by those we are attempting to influence as representing self-serving partisan interests. Self interest is of itself no bad thing in lobbying, but in PR terms, altruism is the short cut to the moral high ground; as any AMA doctor will explain.

And as Machiavelli reminds us, real influence is nearly impossible to achieve in the absence of real power, which is not something library workers normally possess. Without the altruistic world view that typically accompanies a professional code of ethics, we become, in effect, a narrowly focused trade-union-like organisation – relevant to members during times of crisis and threat, but otherwise struggling to demonstrate a higher purpose.

In May, members of the aliaNEWGRAD email list contributed to a fascinating discussion around the question of why they were or were not members of their professional association. My thanks and appreciation go to all those who posted views, and Andrew Finegan of the ALIA New Graduates Group for his excellent summary.

Following the email conversation and reading Andrew’s précis of the discussion, I was struck by the lack of altruism and social awareness evident in a body of people identifying as ‘professional’. References to supporting the industry and supporting the profession seemed to be the limit of such aspirations – not one mention of community or acting in the interest of others. And yet, in pressing the case for ALIA membership, a few correspondents did note the connection between professional standing and the role of ALIA “in maintaining the professional standard by which we are ourselves valued, as professionals”.

The question as to whether librarianship is or is not a profession, as defined by the likes of Professions Australia, is largely immaterial. What matters more in my mind is that we all understand, practise, and advocate a set of core professional ethics and values. Thus by our actions, we will be judged by those we serve.

Without an active and public commitment to professional standards, librarians and library technicians will remain practitioners of a useful trade.

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