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Becoming a librarian: from Sydney to Hong Kong via a LIS degree

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal reflection of a new librarian from Sydney, Australia. It is a reflection on her previous lives before her LIS education, and her preparedness upon entering the workforce. The author relates how she learned and developed in the first two years of her library employment, and how she found herself working in an academic library in Hong Kong. The author also shares the results of a brief survey of new librarians working in academic libraries in Hong Kong regarding their experiences of LIS education and first years in the profession. The article concludes with some recommendations for other new librarians entering the workforce.

My story, part 1: the short and the long of it

My name is Jo and I'm a librarian. To be more precise, I'm an Australian librarian who, with only two-and-a-half years experience under my belt somehow ended up working in Hong Kong, a place I had never visited before deciding to move there. How did I get there? The short version goes something like this. After selling books, diamonds, pizzas and really nice pens, being an executive assistant for a film marketing company promoting the Australian film industry internationally, working on short films and video clips (some good, some bad), finding that careers in higher education and social work were not for me, getting work with a major library vendor (shout out to my EBSCO buddies), completing a Bachelor of Media and a Masters of Information Management, I became a librarian. In other words, one thing led to another and before I knew it I was 'librarian-ing' in Hong Kong all day, every day.

The long story is, I think, more interesting and hopefully more helpful to readers who are looking to enter the industry, or have recently joined the profession. It took me a while to get where I am today. I had a few false starts. My Bachelor's degree in Visual Production (read: film studies), for instance, was a false start. Bachelor degrees often are, particularly in the humanities. However, that doesn't make them worthless, or that the time and money spent on them are wasted, although I did feel this way at the time. After completing my degree and receiving my piece of paper (a really nice piece of paper), I drifted between short-term paid positions, volunteer film positions, and retail work at a bookstore (shout out to my Borders Books buddies). Long-term work was difficult to find and when I did find it I didn't

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like what I saw. The simple truth was that in finding work in the film industry, I discovered that a love for film was not the same as a love for filmmaking. It wasn't what I expected or what I wanted, but I did pick up skills and techniques to do with visual style, editing, project management, and marketing. Next, I enrolled in a Bachelor of Secondary Education. Another false start, but, again, I picked up important ideas and practical skills: instructional design, lesson planning, verbal and written communication in classrooms, student dynamics, and presentation skills. This short period also gave me a renewed respect for teachers – those damned fine, hard-working, dedicated teachers.

Through both false starts, retail work was a constant. Most of the time, I worked in a bookstore. Retail can be a tricky job. There are plenty of times when you're under-stimulated, underpaid, overtired, and being confronted by a challenging customer looking for the second book in Dan Brown's Robert Langdon series. It can also be a really rewarding job, one where you get to test a variety of skills, in particular customer service. What I enjoyed most about customer service was, and still is, problem-solving. Some problems are simple, as in a basic goods and services exchange at the register. Some problems include conflict ('I'm terribly sorry that we are still out of stock of "The Secret". There's no need to use that kind of language'). Some problems are technically difficult. The technically difficult ones require a mix of empathy, communication skills, and a healthy dose of information management skills (I'm looking at you, poorly designed Borders catalog).

The point of each false start is that each time I was developing into the librarian I am today. Yes, each time I became despondent about wasting time, money and energy. I felt I was being left behind. However, through the ups (I met Dr. George Miller!) and downs (all those 'venting' customers) and without necessarily being aware of it, I was quietly developing a broad skill set: design and marketing skills, lecturing and lesson planning skills, management and customer service skills. These are skills that I call on regularly today. Each false start focused my career search and led me toward a Masters of Information Management degree, in which I enrolled in 2009. This degree, completed via stints at University of Technology Sydney and RMIT, expanded the lessons and skills I'd learnt, provided direction, and laid the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for working in the contemporary information management field.

Now that my degree is three years and nine months in my past (not that I'm counting), and I have three years and nine months more experience of working in libraries than I did when I began the degree, I have some distance to reflect on the program and its role in getting me to where I am today. In preparing this article, I also got to wondering how my colleagues in Hong Kong reflect on their LIS education. Is my experience different from or similar to other librarians? Did they have similar misgivings about their education and preparedness for the workforce? What are their stories of how they ended up in this profession?

New academic librarians in Hong Kong: a survey

I circulated a short, informal email survey targeting librarians who had graduated in the last five years and are now working in academic libraries in Hong Kong. I asked them the questions I was asking myself: How much of your program are you actively using? How much of the program was not immediately applicable? How do your previous experiences impact

your current work? I received responses from 12 people: 8 had studied in Hong Kong, 2 in Australia, and 1 each in Canada and the United States.

Respondents provided anecdotes and views on the ways that LIS programs prepared them for employment. One respondent stated that the program was an introduction 'to the library science world', while another recalled that 'some … classes shift[ed] my mindset to be [a] better fit in my current role.' Another confessed that:

> I used to think that the theories I learned in my LIS education were useless; however, after working full time in my current role, I find that [those] theories provide a very good framework to think about problems to do with program design and strategic library planning. When you are lost, these theories really help you to get down to the fundamentals.

In short, the theoretical characteristics of the program prepared students for the workforce, but the impact was not clear until they gained employment in libraries.

The respondents also reflected on characteristics of LIS programs they felt could be included or strengthened in order to prepare LIS students more comprehensively for the range of tasks associated with working in an academic library. They highlighted, for example, the need for further training in teaching, management and 'collection development, project management and human resources allocation'. Similarly, a respondent stated that they were not taught about bibliometrics and concepts of research impact: 'my LIS program didn't talk about IR [Institutional Repository] or scholarly communications … I had never heard of ORCID before, or ResearchGate, Academia, Scopus, Web of Science, open access.' As well, respondents highlighted a need for improved communication and outreach skills. For instance, one respondent argued that there was 'no formal training [in their LIS education] on outreaching to faculty members … no formal training on marketing and/or advocating the library … no formal training in negotiation.' Finally, many referred to the need to participate in professional development activities in order to integrate into and progress in library work: the LIS program lead respondents to employment which lead them, in turn, to continue educating themselves. This reinforces the point above: that is, the theoretical framework only becomes practical once theories are integrated into processes of self development and professional development. In terms of my own story, this view of ongoing professional development points toward the research–practitioner model of librarianship which I have begun to identify with, in large part due to my participation in the 8th Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference in 2015. I have used the theories that I learnt in my LIS program to inform my day-to-day work, but also to broaden my role outside of my job description to take part in research projects focused on the workplace and also about conceptual roles of contemporary librarianship.

The survey also asked participants to comment on how their "past lives" or previous employment and/or education history supports them in their current library roles. In three cases, respondents said that they use their subject knowledge from previous degrees in their roles as faculty librarians. One respondent who reported working as a research assistant commented that their 'experience assisting various research projects help[ed] me to understand the process of research output and the faculty's behaviour.' Certainly, my background in film and communication studies gives me the subject knowledge to support two faculties at City University – the Department of Communication and the School of Creative Media. Just as I strongly value my retail experience for informing my current role, some respondents also talked about customer service and its value in the workplace. One respondent said customer service 'prepared me for reference interviews,' and another that 'customer service

experience prepared me [for] the right mindset for working in public service.' Other general tasks, such as problem-solving, administration skills, communication skills, and collaborative and networking skills, were also identified by librarians as being significant skills that they have transferred from previous employment into their library role.

So while this survey can by no means be used to generalize across all new librarians working in Hong Kong, I think that the survey responses show that across geographical boundaries some librarians are feeling unprepared on entering the workforce, and questioning some of the content of their degrees. In fact, in the #auslibchat Twitter conversation, 'Let's talk degrees,' hosted by the ALIA New Graduates Group on 1 March 2016, many of the comments echo the sentiments of the respondents in my survey. My survey's small sample size and its focus on academic librarians are a weakness, but this points to potential for future, more rigorous research. In particular, I would like to take this idea a few steps further by conducting interviews to compare workplace preparedness between people who had worked in libraries before or during their programs, and those who did not, at the same time broadening the scope to include all types of librarians, not only those working in universities. Anyone want to collaborate?

My story, part 2: Imposter Syndrome and learning by doing

As I approached the end of my LIS studies in June 2012, it occurred to me that I should start looking for library work, so I applied for a job at Bond University on the Gold Coast, Queensland. Two weeks before the due date for my final assessment, I received a call to come in for an interview, and two weeks after that I found myself reporting for duty. That's when I got Imposter Syndrome.

Imposter Syndrome is a significant factor for all new librarians. Transitioning from a conceptually based learning experience to one where theoretical ideas need to be implemented and practiced in the workplace is tricky business. In my first few months at Bond University, I found myself assigned the following tasks, none of which were addressed in my studies:

- Management of the library's social media presence.
- Development of outreach campaigns and activities.
- Delivery of information literacy instruction.
- Design of online information literacy modules using tools like LibGuides, Articulate Storyline, and Camtasia (never heard of any of these).
- Coordination of the Library's RefWorks subscription (never heard of RefWorks either).

When faced with all these unfamiliar tasks, I did what any self-respecting new librarian does: I practiced learning by doing, or rather I faked it 'til I made it. To paraphrase comedian and culture critic Jerry Seinfeld, fake confidence is not that different from real confidence. No one really knows whether you're faking it or not, except you.

This attitude was coupled with a heightened sense for critical feedback and ideas. I asked as many questions as I could, observed everything that was going on around me, followed what other libraries were doing in industry journals, blogs, and Twitter, made mistakes then attempted to understand where I went wrong, took risks, and sometimes worked on weekends in order to catch up to where I thought I should be. I did anything I could do to try and compensate for what I perceived as a lack of preparedness. In doing so, it became clear that Imposter Syndrome is just another way of defining a motivated employee who is struggling

with confidence, one who is also trying to learn and improve everything they can as fast as they can. Imposter Syndrome sufferers are self-aware. I was. I felt that I was behind and needed to catch up.

An extension of this strategy (made up of learning by doing, accepting and responding to feedback, and searching for ideas) concerns three important learning opportunities that occurred outside my job description at Bond University Library: attending professional conferences, participating in a professional Twitter network, and contributing to workplace research. Listening to industry leaders and new librarians speak passionately and, at times, provocatively at industry conferences had the dual effect of broadening my knowledge and sparking my energy and enthusiasm for the profession. In the context of conferences, the comments and discussion (and cheeky humor?) on the Twitter back channel is a great way to engage more deeply with the content of the presentations and with other delegates. Live tweeting at conferences pushes me to communicate my understanding of ideas and arguments succinctly. I also found that it's a great launch pad for face-to-face networking ('Hi! I think you retweeted me in concurrent seven!'). I was on Twitter for some time before attending my first conference, but always as a lurker. Now, I check into Twitter most days to get my head in the right space, eavesdrop on what others are getting up to in their workplaces, and stalk the profiles of the librarians I admire most. (I'm watching, always watching!)

My strategy has also helped strengthen my approach to and my output of research. Since beginning my professional employment, I have co-authored two peer-reviewed journal articles, presented at four conferences, and have two other research projects in the pipeline. I didn't necessarily set out to do research when I started being a librarian, but being active and accepting that I needed to learn by doing in research is another way to combat issues to do with confidence. The articles I have co-authored have tested my research skills, expanded my knowledge of the profession, and cemented relationships with colleagues. An extra benefit is that research has given me the knowledge and credibility I needed to work with postgraduate students and academic staff. Another is that it looks good on a resume.

What can new librarians take from this story?

False starts, film studies, teaching, customer service skills, Imposter Syndrome, research practice: these were all factors in my personal and professional development, and have culminated in the opportunity to live and work in Hong Kong. My experience highlights several recommendations for new librarians:

- Think strategically about your previous work or study. Ask yourself: 'How can my previous experiences strengthen my library career?' Treat these experiences as characteristics that have the potential to distinguish your work.
- Try to say yes (to everything). Learning new tools and skills, experiencing new ideas and theories, developing new collaborations all come from saying yes. You never know where it could lead you.
- Make yourself visible. Contribute to your institution's Facebook page, participate on Twitter (for instance #ALIA, #auslibchat), keep your LinkedIn profile up to date, post and/or comment on R/Libraries on Reddit, create a blog, and push to get involved in research and conferences.

- Be proactive about professional development. Set aside time each week to keep up with journal articles or personal blogs. If choosing a professional development course, pick something with tangible outcomes for your current role or something in the near future.
- Join ALIA and register for their Professional Development Scheme so you can demonstrate to current and future employers your commitment to ongoing education and development.

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Notes on contributor

Joanna Hare (BMedia, Macquarie University; MA InfoMgmt, RMIT) has been working in academic libraries since completing her Masters of Information Management in 2012. Joanna is currently a Subject Librarian at City University of Hong Kong, and a coordinator of Hong Kong Libraries Connect, an independent group connecting library professionals across sectors in Hong Kong. Joanna's interests include information and digital literacy, research support for Humanities and the Arts, new models of customer service, and evidence-based librarianship.

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