

21st Century Curatorship

July 22 2004

Introductions

Paul LeClerc, President of NYPL, welcomed the participants and looked forward to a series of important ‘interventions’ on what was becoming an increasingly important topic: what constitutes the kind of curators that libraries and other major research institutions, concerned with the transmission of learning, will need for the future. He thanked the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for support of the project and outlined how NYPL and the British Library have been working together on this project, and a series of curatorial and senior management exchanges and visits.

Stephen Bury described the origins of the British Library 21st Century Curator Project : there would be a loss of up to a third of the curatorial cadre, many in singleton posts, in the next five years: how would these be replaced? Could collection-based research be sustained? How could new skills that were needed for the hybrid research environment be grafted on to existing staff? What was a curator? In discussions with NYPL it became clear that this was not a unique problem, and the purpose of this conference was to see if libraries, museums and archives, internationally, could share solutions to common problems.

Keynote speech: David Rumsey ‘New Technologies, new users: emerging challenges for curators’ www.davidrumsey.com

David Rumsey stressed the revolution that digital technologies in combination with the Internet had brought about, and that there were challenges and opportunities for 21st Century curators e.g. the addressing of the needs of new users and exploring the possibilities of bringing collections physically dispersed together. This could not be left to the techies or programmers and there was an important role for curators in the selection and interpretation of objects to be digitised, and their renewal and refreshment. These new technologies –such as geo-rectification - work best when shaped by people who understand collection content. Curators need not become software experts but needed an awareness of what could and should be done. David instanced Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software interfacing with historical cartography.

Discussion: need for curators to be aware of the economics of digitisation and have entrepreneurial skills – including being prepared to fail; curators operate in an institutional setting, rather than as individual collectors.

Session 1: Collection interpretation and access in the 21st Century; assessing curatorial added value

Howard Dodson (Schomburg Centre, NYPL)

Institutional context of curatorship: they operate in institutions with pre-defined missions and agendas. There is a difference between roles of curators in museums and libraries. In museums the purpose is to devise exhibitions, educational programmes and experiences for audiences – the curator, as expert, functions as mediator between collections and the public being served. This is different to the library curator: although they may be experts at certain levels, their function is to collect and organise their collections for their users, who are or become the experts or interpreters. Curators are already struggling to collect, catalogue, process and preserve original material, and now new media and technologies are producing a myriad of electronic resources at a rate much greater than traditional collection materials accumulated in the past, and curators are expected to organise these new and more abundant materials intellectually.

In the museum world the roles of curators have been appropriated by three groups – the IT specialists, marketing and museum educators. At Schomburg interpretative functions have been shared with external academics, with curators having a navigational role. The 21st Century curator will need to work in different types of partnerships – with scholars and IT experts. Curators will have to work collaboratively rather than individually, as in the past.

Henrietta Lidchi (British Museum)

Do curators convey the value they add to collections to their publics (including our political masters) who probably have little conception of what a curator is? If we can't make the case for what we do and why we do it, our funding will disappear.

As an anthropologist, she is used to drawing in the communities which produce the artefacts to interpret them, but on reflection was struck by the fact that this diligence in relation to the wider museum audience was not part of the planning process. She was struck by the fact that as a curator, at that time, she was not fascinated by how the audience would react, or interpret what was on display or how they could be challenged to look at an object in different ways. This would be more part of her thinking now.

Alice Prochaska (Yale)

Digital collections are essentially the same things as those which we have always dealt with. Knowledge of the content, interpretation and access remain fundamental to the curator's task.

Old skills and new skills necessary to operate in the new environment go hand in hand. Curators are increasingly important, but not all institutions recognise this.

Special libraries and special curatorship are increasingly seen as central to research libraries.

It is increasingly important in the digital world to convey the context both of the original materials and their surrogates (and the relationship between).

Expert scholars accept that they need help to navigate these collections. Her Yale colleagues had supplied some commentary: the academic sees the trees but not the wood. The IT specialist understands the vehicles but not the content. These roles are often not understood by the parent institutions.

Sarah Thomas (Cornell)

Curators cannot continue in old ways. There are new requirements: in interpretation there is a movement away from one view to many views; curators need partnering and contract skills.

Curators are increasingly mediating between scholars and technologists and have to work collaboratively in teams.

There are new opportunities e.g. democratic capture of visitors' comments – Amazon reviewers.

Curators need to determine what's authentic and give truth and trust, credibility.

They need to track developments in scholarship

Benchmarking: web trends, uses of materials they curate and knowledge of what people will pay for.

Abby Smith (CLIR)

Scholars talk about what something means, whilst curators talk about how something means. Sometimes scholars err because they do not understand how complex collection items are and how they build their meanings. How objects carry meaning is its own scholarly discipline that is not recognised in the academy. Curators ought to think of themselves as peers in scholarship. Curators are needed more than ever – because of digitisation and other 20th century information technologies – audio-visual.

Session 1: Discussion:

Synonyms of curator: contextualiser, mediator, selector, interpreter, navigator, universalist, synthesiser, collaborator.

Example of Gutenberg Bible digitisation and three institutions doing their own independent (and largely incompatible) digitisation – none worked with each other etc. And different interpretations.

Does technology drive the collections, or do the collections drive technology?
Fear amongst curators: is their role changing from curating and interpretation to promoting access (to some materials we don't even own)?

Dilemma of there being so much 'traditional stuff' curators haven't yet provided access to, and the consciousness of loss of contemporary, ephemeral (in life-cycle rather than importance) materials: what should be the priority?

Scholarship is about knowing the authenticity of the object, but many digitisation projects do not make it easy to verify from where the image derives (lack of call numbers etc.) - a paradox when digitisation increases the number of people who want to see the original object.

Curators contextualise the information: it means collecting, ensuring the authenticity of the object, interpretation, providing access, supplying the context of when it was created and what it means over time. The key value – whether the institution owns or provides access to it – is the contextualisation of the information for the user – which starts with authenticity.

What is the point where/when the curator ceases to become a collections/materials expert and becomes a subject expert?

Digital projects move the library curator closer to the interpretative – exhibition – role of the museum curator.

Building digital collections from public input: from build it, they might come to, if they come, we should build it. Curators need to be aware that they if they build collections without this input, it denies potentially other interpretations etc.

Ethical role of teaching the researcher to seek the provenance, question the authenticity of the digital image. The curator has an important role in this aspect of training the citizen, to be high-flown about it for a moment.

In digital world, people want to participate, to interact in interpretation – and this will be read back across the traditional museum and library arena. How do you maintain your identity as a curator within that whole rippling out of what your responsibilities are or might be?

Universal access 'disintermediates' the traditional relationships between scholars and students, curators and gatekeepers.

Institutional constraints that put competition in a global environment above collaboration.

Session 2: Structuring curatorial responsibilities to incorporate sabbaticals, research, publications, exhibitions etc.

Stephen Bury (British Library)

Convincing both the institution and the curator of the value of research was one of the biggest difficulties: the practical problems of setting up sabbaticals, research breaks etc. paled into insignificance.

If the career structure for the curator meant the addition of management responsibilities, there had to be some mechanism for the relief of duties to provide an opportunity for them to do research, to remain effective curators.

Ciara Eastell (Clare Leadership Scheme)

Need to evidence the value of library and museum services.

Driver for much local government interest in digitisation has been the woeful inadequacy of local museum and archives for the disabled.

Interesting BBC-related projects which have involved helping older people to digitise their own materials, but no thought on preservation.

Requirement to evidence added value of services to people's lives – quality of life etc. but this is very difficult. Now using Inspiring Learning for All (ILfA) as a tool for this.

Clare fellowships scheme itself reflects the perceived need for leadership in the cultural sector. Mentoring very important as is the mechanism for an organisation receiving back someone (and their experience) who has been on sabbatical etc.

Cathy Henderson (Harry Ransom Center)

Constraints from specific institutions may impede usefulness of generic solutions.

Stephen Twigg (National Archives, UK)

2 km of government records, paper and electronic, coming in every year.

Record specialists rather than curators covering Domesday Book to the Hutton Inquiry.

70% of users are genealogists, 15% academics/historians, 15% legal interests. Most personal genealogists do not tend to return.

4 panels of academics (medieval, early modern, modern and contemporary), meeting once a quarter to advise on what sort of publications/research the NA should be doing.

Use of academics as 'virtual curators'.

Session 2: Discussion

Fundamental question is what do we want curatorial staff to do in the future.

Need to tell curators how and what to prioritize.

There needs to be more interchange and collaboration with University sector.

How can research breaks be made more successful? Need to bridge the gap between what curators think they should be doing and what institutions expect of them.

Debate on sabbaticals v research breaks, and should the latter be just a re-arrangement of existing duties.

Usefulness of research break sometimes lies in casting the curator into the user's perspective.

Difficult to separate professional development and research in the digital world.

What is an appropriate workload for a curator? Where is the point where the work is too much? Is just a question of time management?

Is there a curatorial personality?

Are there any curatorial functions than can be streamlined or re-engineered?

It is a question of old strategies responding to new technologies, new expectations and new products that underlies the issue of workload. In the special collections library world we want to maintain custodial and stewardship responsibilities, add to that interpretative responsibilities in a new technology, for a new audience, in a collaborative effort, grant-funded etc.

“Waste disguises itself as useful work”

Is there a role for the regional peripatetic curator?

Advantage of specialised doing some cataloguing and reference desk work so that they know users needs etc.

NLA: subject or ‘matrix’ curators in music and dance, across collections – without reference room duties, management responsibilities etc.; able to take on and welcome many of new tasks – digitisation, outreach etc.

Need to create a workplace where the efforts of all staff are valued.

Roundtable sum up of priorities:

Academic as curator

Institution/curator tension of expectations of role: what are the institution's expectations?

Re-engineering

New responsibilities – IPR etc.

Collaboration

Traditional/new continuity

Curators knowledge of content and the information technologies that have produced these objects over time

Core values of curator, connected to 'stuff' whether digital or vellum

Curator and library/museum administration: do we both have the interests of the collections at heart as we enter the future?

Curatorial personality/psychology

Collaboration/competition

Role of leadership in institutions to lead curators into the future

New universal availability of digital information, revalues cultural property and its interpretation

Issue of risk – innovation in a risk-averse culture

What do the public think curators are?

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Session 3: Skills and competencies: the specialist v generalist curator

Mura Ghosh (University of London Library)

Described change in UK, driven by more attention being paid to users, towards subject librarians (usually not involved in processing, cataloguing etc.), and even the term 'subject librarian' was being replaced by 'academic liaison librarian' etc.

The pressure of marketing services and collections to widening audiences, is leading to merger of specialist and generalist, sometimes within the same person.

Leslie Morris (Harvard)

Curators uncertain of what is expected from them.

Core functions:

Curators acquire material – people skills needed (negotiation, gift, donors, contractual, sense of market, research potential)

Long-term care of collections in all formats – problem with unstable digital objects. This responsibility may make curators be perceived as conservative – role of saying no.

Use: supervision of cataloguing – MARC, EAD. Digitisation of finding aids; exhibitions – via partnerships with academics.

Susan Allen (Getty Research Institute)

On a subject speciality need for additional skills – copyright, legal, import, people skills for donors, competency with non-print materials: audio-visual, photographs.

The personality now required to do this is very different to the traditional librarian profile.

Alice Schreyer (University of Chicago)

Authenticity important today.

The question of where the replacement cohorts for curators are going to come from, may need rephrasing in terms of how are we going to give these the appropriate training and core competencies.

Many library and information science schools have so changed their curriculum that the graduate from there needs more training in special collections skills. Also a need for continuing education for those within the profession to update their skill sets.

Possible models: Rare Books School, Charlottesville – EAD, management and disciplinary

Discussion

When working with donors, it is often curatorial passion for their collections and an awareness of the continuity of knowledge over time.

Long view of the collections jeopardised sometimes by short-term access or short-term needs of the institution, that constantly change.

Importance of communication skills.

Era of the library school turning out a finished curator is gone.

Working in teams could address lack of particular skills in individual curators.

Expertise in the field.

Role of digitisation in setting up a ‘canon of availability’

Knowledge of trends in research – creating trends.

Mapping of competencies, skills and the source of that training, experience etc.

Museum studies tend to produce the generalist rather than the specialist.

Entry qualifications/subsequent training/sabbaticals for specialist research

Project management

Tasks pushed down by and from management – recruitment etc. that impact on curatorial time

Need for core skills for managers
Time-management and prioritisation skills

Cost-benefit of any activity; investment/outcome

How is Higher Education feeding the profession, especially PhDs...?

Soft skills from Library Schools

Institutions have a 'disjunct' requirement.

List of core values/skills:

1. Subject/object expertise in a discipline
2. Ability to communicate with a variety of constituencies at different levels
3. Knowledge about the artifacts and how they were produced
4. Sense of passion: someone who really loves the stuff
5. Ability to work in a team, that requires being able to take on different roles
6. Common sense
7. Ability to do bibliographic instruction and teach
8. Technological literacy
9. Knowledge of legal environment in which objects are created and served
10. Inquisitiveness – object, audience, and context in which you work
11. Adaptability
12. Political savviness
13. Managing without authority
14. Generosity
15. Core values of librarianship – intellectual freedom
16. Professionalism

Session 4: Recruiting and succession planning

David Penniman (School of Informatics, Buffalo)

In museum sector, shift from focus on collections to a focus on audience.
Move from traditional to digital collection.

Julie Sweetkind-Singer (Stanford)

GIS librarianship has been added to traditional format specialisation at a very quick rate.

Recruitment could be targeted to undergraduates at introductions, career night, interns etc.

Joyce Ray (Institute of Museum and Library Services)

Librarians for the 21st century programme – digital asset management, research methodology, leadership, continuing education. She wanted to encourage participants to think about ideas for grant projects that IMLS might fund, which would address some of the issues raised at the meeting – recruitment, formal professional education, continuing education, or staff exchanges. Although only U.S. institutions could apply, collaborative projects were encouraged. www.imls.gov/grants/library

Steven Higgins (MoMA)

Library skills v art museum curatorial tradition of connoisseurship.

Margy Burn (National Library of Australia)

Knowing what you don't know and being able to recognise other people's strengths important for team-working.

Not convinced that library schools are the source of the new generation of curators, but there are other sources: need to convince passionate graduates, at home with primary source materials, in humanities that libraries need them and vice versa.

Session 4: Discussion

Need to have a conversation between library schools and research libraries.

Internships (graduate and undergraduate) as a method of recruitment e.g. of Harry Ransom Research Center.

Importance of role models

Mentor/mentee programmes

Selling profession to institutions

Waste of skilled personnel after completion of special projects.

Linguistic-based curators

Issue of mobility

Salary levels – effectively local recruitment

Flexibility in working patterns – components of jobs need examining for distance working.

Will the job be completely different in a primarily born-digital archive?

‘Skunk Works’ Project at Bell Labs versus Young Turks

Importance of building trust in our organisations

Final Session

Summary

Imbrication of all the issues we had discussed interpretation, involved skills and succession planning etc. etc.

A thread of all the discussions was the disjuncture between institutional and curatorial expectations and values. Need for bridging activity.

Is there a role at all for the curator in the 21st century curator? We answered, passionately, that there was and that perhaps it was greater than ever.

Threats: marketing, IT specialists, education that Howard itemised. Nobody is suggesting that the 21st century curator should be a marketing expert, an IT specialist or a high school educator, but there is a need to recognise when somebody can do something better than they can.

Another threat was workload – traditional responsibilities plus the new. Various solutions – time management, prioritisation, common sense, giving up activities e.g. matrix curators.

Fundamental role of the curator is knowing what an item is (or is not), and this does not disappear in the digital world.

Forward activities:

1. Library schools – institutional dialogue needed.
2. What we need to provide ourselves additionally – individually and perhaps collaboratively e.g. Manuscripts School, AV School
3. Immersion courses, internships, mentoring, role modelling
4. Benchmarking added curatorial value collectively or bilaterally
5. Waste of talent from short-term projects
6. Need to know how PhD students in 2020 will approach materials

7. List of competencies – to be compared with our own institutions or ARL

Type of curatorial value etc.	Area	Where from?
Qualification	Subject expertise in a discipline or format	PhD
Quality	Capacity to communicate with a variety of internal and external people	Personal but developable
Qualification/skill	Knowledge about the object	Experience in job based on disciplinary training
Quality	Passion about collection	Personal
Qualification/skill	Understanding of context of objects / provenance	Experience in job based on disciplinary training
Quality	Inquisitiveness	Personal
Skill/qualification	Ability to work in a successful team e.g. managing without authority	Personal but developable
Quality	Time management / common sense	Personal
Qualification/skill	Bibliographic instruction / teaching skills	Library school followed by experience. Personal teaching style.
Qualification/skill	Technological literacy	Library school / staff development
Quality	Adaptability	Personal
Qualification/skill/quality	Corporate awareness / strategic thinking	Personal but developable

Quality/skill	Political savviness, influencing skills	Personal but developable
Qualification/skill	Legal expertise	Library school
Quality	Generosity	Personal
Values	Core values of librarianship e.g. intellectual freedom	Personal, library school
Values	professionalism	Personal, library school
Values	Commitment to lifelong learning	Personal
Values	Commitment to the user/customer or public service	Personal

Which are entry level requirements and which can be developed?

Where are the gaps and how we plug them?

Is there anything here that would not have been asked of a curator 10 years ago? Is this forward-looking enough?

What is the future scenario?

Mixture of traditional and new materials, and some materials we can't even imagine. Technology is a means of transmission as well as transformation.

Differentiate what is specifically required from curators as opposed to all librarians.

Need to research future user demands

Changes in scholarly communication

Need to develop expertise in audio-visual, film and digital areas cf. rare books school, otherwise there is a danger of such objects being used in a completely inauthentic way, and content being seen purely as content and not part of the object as well.

We looked to the future and saw a continuity not just with the values, qualities, qualifications and skills that professionally we recognise, but these need applying to new contexts and media, especially around authenticity.

Need to keep contact with our research communities, but also make approaches to those communities that come to our materials in different ways.

