The role of the cataloguer in 21st century

Lynne Dyer

Introduction

The skills, knowledge and understanding that cataloguers have make them a valuable resource, but they need to keep up with the changing environment. In times of economic downturn, when institutions are looking to reduce their costs, it pays to be flexible, and have a wide variety of skills to offer. With the continual development of IT, it is essential that cataloguers take an active role in this development and use their analytical talents to ensure that systems are led by need rather than by the force of IT capability alone.

Cataloguing and classification have been referred to by Omekwu (2008, p. 188) as “the central nervous system of librarianship”, and as such cataloguers themselves are vital to their library. They have already proved themselves capable of responding to new and changing scenarios, for example by grasping automation and using it to their advantage. Now, in these days of global and networked environments, of enhanced digital technologies, of the internet and cyberspace, virtual libraries have sprung up and there has been a huge growth in the amount of knowledge available, most of it disorganised and scattered.

The skills sets and competencies that cataloguers already have make them entirely suitable to exert some control over the wild wayward web, and to take advantage of the possibilities technology offers in relation to retrieval and presentation of information.

Of course, economic downturn is not the only reason for enhancing the skill sets of cataloguers.

Some reasons for a change to the role of cataloguers

- Changes in society
- Purely and simply, personal development needs
- Economic – scrutiny of funding and spending, often seen as expensive
- Technological advances, resulting in need to change work flows and learn new skills
- Availability of improved procedures and tools
- New management styles and philosophies (mainly derived from the business world, and including preference for outsourcing, management favouring added responsibilities, or priority shifts and expanding services without more resources)
- Ensuring best use of professional time
- Co-operative cataloguing model changing (Wolven, 2008), (since 1970s built on consensus, now moving towards a new model involving consensus on what to tell vendors, publishers and agencies that might do our cataloguing for us, and a model of a culture based on principles and judgement rather than comprehensive set of rules)
- Availability of institutional repositories and open access
- Changing user needs/wants (Byrd, 2006), (e.g. instant gratification, wide choice, improved products and services, ability to customize their library services)
- Shift from print to electronic, which requires more maintenance
- Lack of teaching of cataloguing skills on HE courses
- Need for skills in the area of archiving of web pages
- Growth in publishing output, print and e, so can’t keep up
- Advance of web 2.0, web 3.0 – users’ preference for enriched content
- Users’ expectations in terms of retrieval and delivery

Suggestions for new, enhanced roles and competencies for cataloguers
1. Participation in front-facing duties (recorded by Folsom (2000), as early as the beginning of the 1980s). Advantages to the library service are:

1.1. Technical knowledge (of the catalogue itself, of the record structure, the automated system, all through day-to-day cataloguing, retrospective conversion, migration from one LMS to another etc.)
1.2. Subject knowledge and other access points, through use of LCSH
1.3. Likelihood of spotting errors and anomalies on the catalogue and being able to correct these
1.4. Knowledge of technical services workflow and procedures (to locate missing items or speed along the processing of new stock, knowledge of what new stock is coming through)
1.5. Fresh ideas and attitudes as it is a change from normal work in cataloguing
1.6. More flexible staff

2. Participation in bibliographic instruction/induction (recorded by Folsom (2000), as early as the late 19th century)

2.1. Training of library staff and users in the effective use of the catalogue
2.2. Production of training materials to support 2.1 above

3. Collection development work (Folsom, 2000)

3.1. Identifying new editions of works and withdrawing old ones
3.2. Withdrawing of unused stock
3.3. Stock checking
3.4. Production of management information to aid collection development
3.5. Evaluation of internet resources, establishing general characteristics of those that justify the cost of cataloguing

4. Acquiring multi-lingual skills (Maher, 2009)

4.1. For use as a cataloguing skill
4.2. To help with communicating with users

5. Becoming familiar with metadata schema and standards, and usage (Maher, 2009)

5.1. Examining relevant schemes and identifying their uses
5.2. Identifying possibilities for enhancing existing schemes, e.g. embedding LCSH, or other controlled subject vocabulary schemes in DCM (Holmes, 2001)

6. Being able to create metadata for digital and archival collections (Wolven, 2008) and creating collection-level records (Chou, 2008)

7. Involvement in digitization, and other documentation projects (Wolven, 2008 and Chou, 2008)

8. Developing IT skills

8.1. Knowledge of website coding (Wolven, 2008) and development of other software
8.2. Investment in web 2.0 and web 3 applications

9. More in-depth cataloguing of traditional new stock

9.1. Inclusion of detailed contents notes
9.2. Inclusion of user-contributed tags
9.3. Access to online versions/toes etc.

10. Explore potential for automating some of the cataloguing process

11. Embark on a programme of data quality enhancement
   11.1. Authority control
   11.2. Use of LCSH
   11.3. Improvement of migrated data and retrospective conversion data

12. Adoption of new and emerging standards
   12.1. Contribute to development of new standards, be they cataloguing or metadata, or other

13. Indexing journal articles (Chou, 2008)

14. Involvement in Google books

15. Design and testing of metadata services (Bowen, 2008)

16. Managing the flow of metadata (Bowen, 2008)

17. Involvement in system/application design (Bowen, 2008)

18. User research (Bowen, 2008)

19. Enhancement of process management skills

20. An involvement in anything to do with knowledge, be that:
   20.1. Analysis
   20.2. Asset managing
   20.3. Authentication
   20.4. Brokering
   20.5. Editing
   20.6. Engineering
   20.7. Gate-keeping
   20.8. Identification
   20.9. Navigating
   20.10. Organising
   20.11. Segmenting

21. Partner together within an institution, or network with other cataloguers to improve competencies

**Survival tips for the cataloguer**

- Plenty of relevant training
- Having a mentor
- Seeing the bigger picture
- Good communication skills
- Feedback to relevant staff
- Developing good time management skills
- Developing project management skills
• Having realistic expectations of what can be done/achieved
• Being flexible
• Actively seeking learning opportunities
• Maintaining awareness of current trends in cataloguing/librarianship etc.
• Keeping an open mind
• Presenting options not objections
• Moving with the times
• Being pro-active rather than reactive

Conclusions

Following the survival tips above should ensure that you are fully equipped to be able to identify new and changing roles for yourself at any point during your career or during times of change within the profession itself. In the current climate, being aware of those roles identified above that are applicable to the profession now, and being able to develop skills in these areas will ensure that you are a highly-skilled, valuable employee for any institution.

And finally … Remember:

“… cataloguing and classification are not ends in themselves. They are essentially the bedrock for providing information to the clientele system.” Omekwu (2008, pp. 188)

And:

"...the modern cataloger will one day be a software-enabled specialist who can gather, subset, normalize, and enrich piles of records for a specific audience or purpose.” Tennant (2006, p. 32)

Bibliography


