Just what is a librarian?

Dr Emory McLendon

On the August 1995 cover of *inCite* there is a very clever and pointed cartoon in which a young boy is looking at the graphic of a library building (circa 1886) on his computer screen. He says to his onlooking parents, in a somewhat excited voice, 'Oh wow, look what I found on the information superhighway. A thing called a local library'. The cartoon represents the very real forces of change universally impacting libraries and librarians. In my opinion, there are few professions which are being so quickly and so radically affected by the new technologies of the 'information age' as that of the academic librarian.

With the emerging information superhighway, the academic librarian's job description is changing to include the training of patrons to use technology as a tool and in doing so allowing the patron to become increasingly independent of the librarian and the library as a physical entity.

My perspective on this comes from two different angles. One viewpoint is that of a library user who has attended several internet, CD-ROM and current contents training sessions in the university library. The second perspective is that of an experienced trainer. Earlier in 1995, the Centre for Further Education and Training at the University of South-

ern Queensland was contracted to deliver a two-day workshop for a group of Queensland academic librarians. The workshop, *Implementing effective information skills*, was designed to enhance the training skills and training strategies of these librarians. Over the two days, it became very evident the group recognised their changing job role.

So what is a librarian? It appears the definition is changing to accommodate the evolving technologies. Increasingly, librarians are required to deliver more and more formal training. While I believe this training role will only expand the future, more importantly, the librarians in the workshop believed they would be required to design, deliver and evaluate more training sessions in the future.

As the librarian's training role grows, how are they to acquire the necessary competencies to confidently fulfil this responsibility? Without training in instructional skills, strategies and processes the novice trainer is, at best, struggling to deliver effective training and is typically stressed and frustrated. I imagine each of us has been in at least one workshop with an ineffective trainer. Some of us may even have conducted workshops with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and fear.

So how are librarians, and other library staff who are required to deliver training, to acquire the necessary training skills demanded of their job? The most obvious strategy is to offer inservice workshops with employers and professional bodies as the most likely providers. And what about preservice librarians? I suggest course work in developing training competencies be included in the curriculum of all pre-service award courses. While inservice workshops and preservice curriculum may not be the only strategies for providing training skills to librarians, in my opinion, it is the most effective and efficient choice. As librarians are required to deliver more and more training, it is not only appropriate but necessary they be given the means to become competent and comfortable trainers. This is in the best interest of both the library professional and the library patron. ∎

About the writer...

Dr Emory McLendon lectures with the Centre for Further Education and Training at the University of Southern Queensland. He has a background in teaching, administration, sales and marketing and has spent three years with one of Australia's leading food retailers in a training and quality management role.