

Through the library glass

I'm advocating for advocacy. This is surprising, if you have met me, I don't strike people as a card-carrying librarian (although my ALIA card is probably somewhere in my wallet). Until graduating last year, I may have mumbled something about working in IT at parties; and the only two things I know about advocacy I learnt from my Latin lecturer.

The first: Latin verbs, *advocare*: first conjugation, to call on, summon. In law, to call in the assistance of, speak on behalf of, to advocate. The second, his explanation of why a multimillion dollar marketing campaign for classics was not a necessity, even in a modern world which brands the field as irrelevant. In my experience, this is as untrue for classics as it is for librarianship. And there can be a more powerful weapon than advertising. Graduates - who by their expertise and dedication, by applying their critical skills in new situations, by taking pride in the contribution of their work - speak on behalf of their profession.

I was reminded of this discussion (which both armed against specific stereotypes and inspired) during Kate Davis's recent ALIA Access conference paper *Pimp My Career: How to Get Ahead in Library Land* which made me examine my library career and encouraged me to do better.

I recognized how lucky we are as librarians, to have supportive networks, mentoring, and an active professional association. I also realised that there is an important role for library graduates in advocacy: in defining our contribution for the next generation, in subverting the occasional stereotype, and in speaking up as new members of the profession.

This role is not necessarily glamorous or large scale and I have probably wasted opportunities in the past, waiting for the perfect platform when, in fact, I have peers, acquaintances,

clients outside of libraryland who have limited insights into our profession.

So for me, it's not so much advocacy starting at home - but in the workplace and at parties. For me, advocacy is not a prepared statement, a repetitive slogan or a soap-box, it's an awareness of those moments when I can redress stereotypes, misapprehensions, and deprecations which slide into commonplace interactions.

The most obvious opportunities are when we're jokingly asked what librarians will do for a job when books have been superseded by digital technologies, whether we get bored shushing students, and what do we do all day anyway?

I like to point out that librarians actually exist independently of books. In the ancient near east, they were cataloguing clay tablets and inscribing curses for those who refused to return them long before anyone in western civilization bound paper (or invented library fines). A friend likes to point out e-books will require just as much selection, evaluation, and organization for access as their physical counterparts. Whatever the response, the goal is to look past the book. Librarians are not synonymous with books, but with information.

Whatever the medium - from codex to Wikipedia - librarians are focused on the information: its quality, its relevance, its accessibility - regardless of gender, socioeconomic background, ability. (And as there is over 3000 years worth of collective human thought and knowledge, you will forgive us if we're not quite ready to entrust it solely to the interblag.)

Inside the profession, we are as aware of the new challenges of accessibility in the information age and which the digital native generation face in engaging with information as we are of the changes that have replaced well known complexities and inconveniences. It is easy to forget that from the outside it just looks as if there are less books to organize.

As for the shush factor, many adjectives are nominated in debate about which professional aptitudes make a successful library staff member. I am yet to see ability to shush rank above 86, and from my advantageous position inside the profession, I am defiantly rejecting 'boring'.

'Dedicated', 'passionate', 'attentive' - these adjectives are all part of our best capabilities, but my favourite is 'curious'. Librarians' "curiouser and curiouser" approach ensures lifelong learning is implicit in our jobs. We're constantly exposed to unfamiliar authors, broadening ideas, current research. This is evident in experimentation with new technologies. Few industries have embraced Web 2.0 with the same drive to open communication. In few other careers can you engage with the professional literature and share career expertise through Twitter and blogs as much as in articles. In few jobs is innovation so highly prized.

There's an excellent, efficient, three word answer for these questions: We help people. Helping clients is how I would most readily define my career preference, motive, and routine.

From my own experience in academic libraries, I realize the value of helping people, from something as small as a semicolon in a reference, to empowering someone with the skills to fulfil their potential. Those of us that work on the frontline, on the aptly named help desks, are in some ways the luckiest as we see the direct assistance a library provides in action. Perhaps this should be the primary image we advocate for the 21st century.

From these reflections it is apparent I do not possess an oratorical voice. However, just as new graduates hope that our efforts are reflected in the quality of our work, I'm aiming that even in daily interactions, in the questions I answer about my job, in the services I offer - I can be a better advocate for libraries.

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