CAIS Paper: The Construction of Librarians' Professional Identities: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: Professional identities shape the way professions interact with their clients and society. As librarians are service-oriented professionals, a discursively informed understanding of identity can provide a new way to examine identity and expose the ways it impacts and informs how librarians interact with their clients and society at large.

Résumé:

1. Research Problem and Context

New ways to organize, access, and use information are being developed every day. Hilbert and López (2011) estimated that between 1986 and 2007 computing capacity grew 58%, bidirectional telecommunication grew 28%, and the amount of globally stored information grew 23% per year. This has resulted in more information in the world than ever before. As information specialists, librarians are uniquely placed to help their clients navigate and use this information for their work, their education, and their pleasure. Through the design, implementation, and provision of information services to the public, librarians attempt to meet the information needs of their communities. In doing so, they not only articulate a specific understanding of information and the information needs of their community, they communicate their professional identity and perspective as well. Public perceptions of librarians, however, are tied to the outdated understanding of librarians as keepers of the books (e.g., OCLC, 2005). This creates a tension between the work librarians do and public perceptions of librarians that can create barriers to the effective delivery of information services. This interaction is precisely why understanding the professional identity of librarians is important.

A deeper understanding of the professional identity of librarians will illustrate how librarians understand their role, the services they offer, and how librarians themselves construct their understanding of librarianship. The questions guiding this research are: 1) What are the discourses that information workers ("librarians") use when articulating their professional identities? 2) How do librarians describe their own professional identities? 3) How does this identity function socially? 4) How does this description change depending on the audience? What does this mean?

Although the identity of information seekers has received some attention in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature (see, for instance, Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Given, 2000; McKenzie, 2003; 2004), the professional identity of librarians has not been the subject of much recent academic inquiry, nor is it well understood by researchers. To date, much of the inquiry that purports to be about the professional identity of librarians (e.g., Bennett, 1988) is in fact about the professional image, status, and reputation of librarianship (e.g., Given & Julien, 2005). This literature focuses on the perception of librarians and librarianship and exposes little about the professional identity

of librarians, except perhaps to inadvertently illustrate that librarians are concerned with their professional reputation. In addition, there is a growing body of literature on the teacher identity of librarians (e.g., Julien & Genuis, 2011; Walter, 2008); however, many of these studies are interested in the role identity of librarians and only highlight how librarians understand their roles as instructors and not their overall professional identity.

2. Defining Identity

Identity is defined for this study as a description, or representation, of the self within specific practices. Kemmis (2010) described professional practices as a combination of three kinds of knowledge: the propositional, theoretical and/or scientific knowledge unique to the profession; the profession's craft knowledge, or knowledge of how to do something; and personal knowledge about oneself and in relation to others. These practices are socially, culturally, and historically located and contextualized. Practices are more than just activities performed by professionals, using the three kinds of knowledge outlined above; they provide meaning and intention that guide the activities of practitioners. In other words, practices provide a particular view of what it means to be a professional as well as a specific way to act in the world.

A profession provides an individual with a set of practices that can be used to form an identity. By focusing on how librarians describe their profession, attention can be drawn to how librarians themselves construct librarianship, and how this construction shapes their interactions with patrons, their local communities, other professions, and society at large. Identity can be exposed by studying the interpretive repertoires librarians draw upon when they speak about their profession. Interpretive repertoires are described as "the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). All members of a group draw upon, or borrow, the repertoire when speaking about their work or profession. When language is examined for its interpretive repertoires, it is examined for its functions – both intended and unintended. These functions can be explaining or justifying, etc., or they can work on an ideological level to legitimate the social position of a group. Therefore, professional identity is more than simply a description of the self with specific practices – it also serve a purpose, or function, and has different social consequences and implications as a result.

3. Research Design

A discourse analysis approach was employed to examine the full range of interpretive repertories employed by librarians when they construct their professional identities. For this study, three different data sources were used: professional journals, email discussion lists, and research interviews. Each data set was analysed for the discourses librarians use when describing librarians, librarianship, and professionalism. As this study is interested in the overall professional identity of librarians, data representing different library sectors, as identified by *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries* (8Rs Study) (2005) (academic, public, school government and special), were included.

First, a textual analysis of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from ten professional journals from 2000-2012 was completed. The professional journals included in this study were:

- *American Libraries*
- *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- *College & Research Libraries*
- *Feliciter*
- *Information Outlook*
- *Information Today*
- *Library Journal*
- *Public Libraries*
- *School Library Journal*
- *Teacher Librarian*

In addition, contributions from five email discussion lists from 2010-2012 were analysed. The discussion lists were selected because they encouraged active discussions among subscribers (i.e., were not "read only" lists used only to disseminate information). In addition, they all had publicly accessible archives. The email discussion lists included in this study were:

- CLA
- ILI-L
- PUBLIB
- MEDLIB-L
- LM_NET

This data was then supported with 16 interviews with Canadian librarians working in all library sectors. Following the 8Rs Study (2005), professional librarian was defined for this study as a person holding a Master's of Library and Information Science (or equivalent) from an ALA-accredited LIS program with a position at the professional level as a librarian or manager. Topics covered in the interview included the participants' descriptions of librarianship, their activities as a librarian, and their thoughts on the professionalism of librarianship. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted from 1-2 hours each. Each interview was transcribed before analysis.

Following Potter and Wetherell (1987), the analysis of the data focused on the variation and similarities both within individual examples, such as a single interview or article, and across the data sets. Attention was paid to the context and function of the repertoires use. Why was the repertoire being used? What was the speaker/writer attempting to accomplish in that passage? Are certain repertoires given primacy within certain contexts?

4. Findings

The professional identity articulated by librarians describes librarians as service-oriented and change-focused. There is a lot of focus on *what* librarians do: they educate, organize, and serve the information needs of their patrons, clients, and customers. They are experts

who solve problems and understand their clients' information needs better than their own clients do. Rhetorically, librarians often equate themselves with the library-as-place, using phrases such as "how are libraries going to meet user demands?" The terms "librarian" and "information professional" are used interchangeably; however, their use is often context dependent. For instance, librarian is used when traditional information environments, such as public libraries, are discussed, while information professional is used in relation to special library environments. Each term carries with it additional meanings; Librarian denotes tradition and durability and information professional evokes expertise and professionalism.

This description of librarians and librarianship serves to reaffirm the value of the profession to librarians themselves. This is especially apparent when the profession's value is perceived to be questioned by others. The emphasizing of skills and expertise, for instance, functions as a way to highlight the value of information professionals to others, while confirming its value to librarians. Discursively, the articulated identity of librarians serves to unite the profession, often in opposition to various user groups (such as faculty members), other information providers (Google or library vendors), and other professionals. The identity transcends other non-professional identities, such as one's gender or race identity, and provides a common ground for all professionals regardless of the information environment in which they work.

The librarians' professional identities are connected by shared interests and concerns and drawn together by the latest technologies. By focusing on how librarians describe their profession, attention can be drawn to how librarians themselves construct librarianship. A deeper understanding of the professional identity of librarians illustrates how librarians understand their role, the services they offer, and what librarians themselves feel is their place in society. Additionally, this study contributes a fully conceived understanding of professional identity to Library and Information Science. This provides a new way to understand the social and cultural assumptions of librarianship as a profession as it extends the study of identity beyond the specific roles that librarians enact during the course of their work, how others perceive librarians, and how librarians perceive themselves. This understanding of professional identity provides a method for studying how the professional identity of librarians influences the way, for instance, library services are designed, library policies are drafted, and how libraries are organized.

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