

Go back and get it: Centering local, national, and cultural histories in international LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

Deep knowledge of national and cultural histories, and collections is fundamental for librarians, not only for engaging the “other” but for self-reflection and awareness of one’s culture and values, and how they drive behavior.

In the Caribbean, recent curriculum transformation and renewal have focused on benchmarking North American, and British traditions and practice, in which issues of technology and information were emphasized as against historical considerations, and there remain gaps in the important area of cultural competence (Montiel Overall, 2009; Ouvrard-Prettol, 2017) especially among academic librarians. A new narrative is needed to address this knowledge gap, since for Caribbean LIS professionals, this void relates not to ‘other’ marginalized, diverse cultures, but their own history and culture.

The paper argues that in addition to knowledge of LIS history, there is need to reclaim national, regional, and attendant cultural histories in LIS programs. Strategies for addressing the imbalance in LIS professionals in the Caribbean are detailed.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

curriculum; continuing education; education program/schools; libraries in developing world; academic libraries.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Cultural competence; local history; cultural history; Caribbean; The University of the West Indies.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge of, and engagement with local history and cultural heritage collections are essential for international LIS professionals to actualize the mission of their libraries, effectively engage with different stakeholder groups, and develop understanding of present postcolonial environments. Yet this knowledge has not been prioritized in LIS education programs in the region for a few reasons. Firstly, the foundations of LIS education in the Caribbean, have been influenced primarily by contending North American and British traditions and trends (Carroll et al, 2013). Further, efforts at transforming LIS curricula are benchmarked and judged against these traditions and practice. Herubel contends that the “LIS profession is a practice which privileges professional prerogatives over historical interests, even the history of the LIS profession, and libraries” (2016). He further states that LIS programs privilege non- historical subjects and training. This has impacted international programs, significantly, and historical subjects are now considered *passé* in the current technology focused environment.

Further discussions illustrating the importance of, yet the scant regards given to, historical orientations in LIS education, are shared by Pawley in 2005, and again in 2019. Pawley describes among others, the rise of technology-oriented courses in an era of transformation of LIS education, and the attendant decrease in historical investigations of the profession. A strong emphasis on digital techniques and products, led to the humanities, including history becoming the “canary in the LIS mineshaft” (2019, p46). Reshaping of curricula, led to many schools adopting the “I-word” with some schools dropping the “L-word”. While there is evidence that there is currently a more nuanced, non-binary approach in LIS programs, history and humanities remain on life support according to Pawley (2019, p50). While these discussions center on the marginalization of library history, the paper argues that even with a history of the profession, without knowledge of national (local) and cultural histories, international librarians are without necessary contexts within which to become “active agents within their communities, and facilitators of knowledge” (Tammaro et al, 2020).

Tammaro et al make a call to go back, while going forward, in their 2020 paper which alludes to the complex challenges for librarians, as the profession is being overtaken by internet and digital technologies, while there is a need for librarians to be also in “contact with their communities, engage with members and facilitate their learning” (p333). They proffer the concept of ‘competence fragmentation’ which speaks to the emergence of new competencies which are fundamental, while traditional approaches of understanding one’s identity, having a rounded background to be able to move in different contexts, must also be considered as essential. Their work calls for balance in transformation of LIS curriculum, rather than privileging one set of competencies over the other.

An understanding of cultural orientations, along with the ability to recognize the significance of history and culture in one’s own life and the lives of others, has been referred to by Montiel Overall as cultural competence (2009). She explains that LIS professionals need to fully understand cultural issues affecting minority and underserved populations and how cultural issues affect perceptions of libraries (p176). Ouvrard-Prettol, posits that “cultural competence is

built by reflecting, working, and developing cultural awareness towards many facets of culture, including but not limited to ethnicity/race, sexuality, gender, socioeconomics, religion, language, and literacy. Being able to confront and accept one's cultural background and set of prejudices will allow one to be able to understand and relate to others better" (2017, p27). A few researchers found a lack of cultural competence among LIS professionals (Montiel Overall, 2009; Ouvrard-Prettol, 2017).

The paper, while adopting the concept of cultural competence, suggests expanding it, by moving the narrative to include knowledge of contending cultural issues arising from local and regional histories, and how these impact LIS professionals' engagement with their collections and clientele. In the Caribbean, while LIS professionals accurately reflect ethnic diversity within the populations, not all are equipped with knowledge of the contending historical narratives, and how these impact current discourses towards effective collection building and engagement. So, while there is a focus on the "other" in many cultural competence discussions, this paper calls for focus on self-reflection and building individual knowledge.

CENTERING LOCAL HISTORY AND CULTURE/ENHANCING CULTURAL COMPETENCE.

While intentional change in LIS curricula towards recentring the place of historical approaches, is recommended (Pawley, 2019), as well as the infusion of diversity and multiculturalism courses (Aytac et al 2016), focus in the literature on addressing deficiencies in cultural competence among LIS professionals have coalesced around continuing education and intentional on the job training. Montiel Overall's Cultural Competence Framework (2009), which involves a multi-step process, has guided research output, and discussion papers. Mestre's 2010 study found that there were not many courses in LIS curricula towards building cultural competence, and so on the job training took precedence. Intentional study, and development of relevant library collections and community interactions, were highlighted in Ouvrard-Prettol's 2017 paper.

Approaches at The University of the West Indies, Mona

Discussions on whether historical approaches will continue as part of the preparation of LIS professionals, are ongoing. At the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, while there has been little effort to include cultural history courses in LIS curricula, there have been attempts within the programs, at promoting and encouraging the pursuit of 'out-of-department' minors (3 courses), particularly in history, as well as individual courses in a range of disciplines, among LIS students. Courses and programs highlighted from the Department of History and Archaeology, include 'Oral History: Sources and Methods', 'Artifacts, Museums and Archives', and 'Heritage Studies'. In addition, at The UWI there has been a longstanding "relationship" between LIS education and subject specialization in history with LIS graduates opting to pursue

graduate studies in History and Heritage Studies. While these routes have ensured that select graduates have knowledge and competencies in these areas, there is need to expand options to include courses in Cultural Studies, from the Institute of Caribbean Studies, with attendant minors in Cultural Studies, Cultural and Creative Industries, and Rastafarian Studies. The breadth of courses offered in these, and other programs across the university have the potential to address possible void in much needed cultural history competence among Caribbean LIS graduates.

Towards preparing academic librarians to actualize the mission of the UWI Mona Library, “*To be a global gateway to Caribbean content, advancing learning, knowledge creation and innovation of The University*”, there has been a focus on developing and enhancing knowledge of, and competence in Caribbean cultural issues, and Special Collections. Strategies employed range from changes in hiring priorities, encouraging research agendas which emphasize cultural and historical approaches, as well as priority funding of attendance and participation at specialist conferences and symposia in West Indiana and Special Collections. A recent emphasis on hiring of librarians with subject specialization in Caribbean History and Caribbean Heritage Studies, provided a positive platform for engagement with other professionals towards building competence, as well as with patrons towards intentional promotion and use of Caribbean collections to support teaching, learning and research. Attempts also at realizing a key strategic objective of the Mona Library in facilitating and supporting Digital Humanities initiatives among UWI faculty, led to the identification of relevant training programs, and subsequent assignment of select librarians in promoting the use of Caribbean resources for DH projects. In addition, providing space, time, and resources for participation in continuous education programs, which address varied aspects of Special and Cultural Collections, remains important, and has proven successful in centering local and national histories in the professional education and development of academic librarians in the Caribbean.

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