The Library Routes Project

Ned Potter, LIFE-SHARE Project Officer, University of Leeds Library

How does anyone become a librarian? Unless you are already working in the sector, it is very hard to imagine the skills you might need to pursue a career in this line of work. The information professional's role is shrouded in a veil of unhelpful stereotypes, but even those who can see through that and grow up wanting to be librarians may find the profession changes so quickly that it bears little relation to what they originally aspired to, by the time they get their first post. I was born in 1980: if my childhood ambition had been to work in libraries, and even if I'd thoroughly researched what being a librarian meant in the 80s, I'd have scarcely been able to conceive of the role I occupy now…

The Library Routes Project documents the career paths of over 100 Information Professionals. The concept is that people working in the Library sector record the roots of their involvement in the profession, and their route through it, and link to this testimony from the Project home-page. The home-page is a wiki, which anyone can edit once they've registered.

The purpose is to shed light on what is something of a hidden profession. What we do, and how and where we do it, is changing rapidly; public perception is struggling to keep pace. Library Routes gives those outside the sector an opportunity to better understand the contemporary role of the Information Professional, and those inside the sector an opportunity to explore and reflect on the myriad paths through a career in libraries.

Origins

The Library Routes movement began on Twitter, the micro-blogging site. During the Autumn of 2009 there were conversations among Twittering librarians, discussing how and why they chose the profession. This led to a spate of blog-posts from bloggers in the library sector, documenting their roots.

One such blog-post by Laura Woods (who blogs at *Organising Chaos*), generated many comments. One of these, from Law librarian Jennifer Findlay, read: *"Maybe we should all write about our routes / roots!"* Reading this, I suggested that we formalise the movement and set up a website to record all the posts. It was a simple matter to create a wiki using free software[i] and free hosting. From that point onwards, Laura Woods and I worked to promote the Project and increase contributions to the wiki.

Methodology

From the beginning, this movement was a uniquely web-based phenomenon; it simply wouldn't have been possible without the media of Web 2.0. The Project went from being a suggestion to a reality in literally half an hour. Because it was able to harness the existing momentum of the 'Why I became a librarian' meme, the wiki very quickly had enough entries to constitute an interesting and useful resource.

The principle of allowing users to write content on their own web-platforms, and simply providing links to these via the Project homepage, was appropriated from a similar online

movement known as Library Day in the Life. Set up by US Librarian Bobbi Newman, Day in the Life runs for a week twice annually, encouraging bloggers to write about what they actually do on those days, for similar reasons to those which motivates Library Routes: to offer increased exposure to the modern Information Professional's role.[ii]

Of course, not every library worker keeps a blog, so there is provision to use the wiki itself to write one's entry, and just link to that. Although Library Day in the Life also offers this functionality, it is notable that very few contributors take that option whereas around 10% of Library Routes testimonies are on stored on the wiki itself. Whether this down to the subject matter better lending itself to a one-off online article, or the fact that there is a large notice on the wiki assuring users that 'Non bloggers are welcome!' is not clear.

Promotion and the viral marketing model

The Library Routes Project conforms to the 'viral marketing' model almost by default. Viral marketing can be described as self-sustaining and self-replicating, via existing social networks. Each time a blogger writes a post on their roots and routes, they are linking to the homepage, contributing to the total number of entries, and advertising it further to all their subscribers. Any number of those subscribers may then choose to blog on their own roots, linking to the wiki, and so perpetuating the process. A great number of the posts are prefaced by sentiments along the lines of: *"Librarian X has recently blogged on his / her entering the library profession, as part of the Library Routes Project,"* and so on. When it is brought to their attention by fellow professionals they admire, people are encouraged to take part themselves.

We also pursued publicity for the Project through more conventional means; both myself and Laura wrote articles for CILIP[iii] publications (Laura's appearing in *Gazette*, which is sent to all circa 20,000 members), and several other library related newsletters and publications have run features on the Project. However, by tracking the dates at which entries appeared, it is possible to see that these traditional print publications did not cause as much of an upsurge in entries to the wiki as did contributions from notable library bloggers with large followings. In particular, there was a post drawing attention to the Project on the influential blog *Stephen's Lighthouse*, written by the former President of the Special Libraries Association, Stephen Abram. His brief article provoked a flurry of entries in a short space of time, particularly from American bloggers. This was gratifying as the demographic had been very UK-centric up until that time.

The third way in which we attempted to generate contributions was by approaching key figures directly. This had varying degrees of success – all of the bloggers approached are influential exactly because they are leaders in their field, which makes them heavily in demand, and time-poor. Some emails were ignored entirely (understandable as in most cases neither Laura nor I had spoken to the individuals before), some drew cautious responses which had to be followed up, and some worked exactly as intended. A pleasing number were really enthusiastic about the Project, and not only wrote contributions which advertised the wiki to a large audience, but passionately advocated that others do the same. At the time of writing, the Project has been running for a little under four months, and has been viewed over 13,000 times.

The testimonies

There isn't room here to analyse the testimonies themselves; the wiki itself is worth visiting to get a feel for the many entries. Suffice to say, no two roots or routes appear to be the same. It is astonishing how little overlap there is between the contributor's career paths, and the circumstances which led to their entering the profession in the first place. Careers Advisors appear to play a key role: a well-placed suggestion to a future librarian at an early age leads to the revelation that the library world is the one for them. Those who don't get that suggestion often seem to go on an occupational wild goose-chase, before eventually realising they'd wanted to be librarians all along.

Library Routes 2.0

The number of entries on Library Routes appeared to reach a natural plateau at around 110, although recently began to increase again. Plans for the future concern how to build in some kind of annual element, to ensure the Project has repeat-value and endures with continual refreshment. It may be possible to borrow more ideas from Library Day in the Life, which operates in 'rounds': Round 4 was this January, and Round 5 will be later in the year. Perhaps people could update the 'route' part of their testimonies, although clearly their 'root' would remain the same.

Another change upcoming for the Project will be the introduction of more multimedia entries. US Librarian Buffy Hamilton, an innovative and influential online presence, suggested adding a vocal recording of her contribution, and we may encourage others to do the same (or video, or any other suitable format) for what will inevitably come to be known as Library Routes 2.0.

You can view the Project homepage, read the testimonies, and of course add your own, at www.libraryroutesproject.wikkii.com.

References

i MediaWiki, as used by Wikipedia

ii Bobbi Newman was consulted and has given her blessing for essentially copying her idea… Indeed, she's contributed her own root / route to the Project.

iii The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals