Tales From the Field: The right mix of theory, practice, and soft skills for educating digital library leaders

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New Librarian Perspective
Filling the expectation gap - from coursework to workplace reality

♦ New digital librarians indicate a large gap between coursework offered in graduate programs and expectations of employers
♦ Job ads for digital librarian positions vary widely in responsibilities and qualifications
♦ Some skills in job ads are nearly impossible to acquire without practical experience
♦ Skills such as project management and strategic planning for digitization and the ability to evaluate and implement best practices are best learned on-the-job or through mentorship
♦ Employers have very high expectations but often cannot articulate their needs

Skills taught in library education:
♦ Largely theoretical foundations
♦ Broad-based subjects and overviews
♦ Technical information is often introductory and quickly becomes outdated
♦ Internships vary with supervisory style and task assignments/responsibility
♦ Few chances for sophisticated decision-making and independent work

Strategy: Apprenticeships
♦ Apply knowledge gained from coursework in the practical library setting
♦ Participate in the development of digital library (DL) projects
♦ Develop a set of practical and technical skills in the context of actual DL projects
♦ Learn project management skills
♦ Develop strong interpersonal and communication skills

“"I think it’s about time that library schools began preparing their students for the rapidly changing culture and purpose of libraries.”
Respondent, new librarian survey, 2010

“Until you’ve worked on a digital project from start to finish, it is difficult to fully understand how important it is to have a solid plan. Something that seems like a good idea at first can cause real headaches later so it’s important to think ahead.”
Dale Bryant, UW-M Libraries Digitization team, 2010

Practicing Librarian Perspective
Internships and more - Not just practical skills

♦ Internships introduce students into a community of practice; integrate coursework with practical experience
♦ Combination of an apprenticeship and mentoring, providing an opportunity to build real-job expertise and a partnership, offering a chance to contribute unique talents and expand professional skills
♦ Encourage international collaboration by inviting students from other countries to participate in developing digital library projects with an international focus
♦ Practicing librarians serve not only as mentors but also as partners providing students with an opportunity for both learning and teaching

Skills required on the job:
♦ Evaluate new technologies and select appropriate local solutions
♦ Monitor and analyze patterns and statistics for decision-making
♦ Metadata design/data life cycles including migration and preservation
♦ Planning and workflow to support new information discovery systems and interfaces
♦ Leadership and confidence and experimentation

Strategy: Partnerships
♦ Contribute unique skills and subject knowledge to the development of DL projects
♦ Share knowledge about standards and recent DL developments learned from coursework
♦ Develop professional skills by building upon individual expertise and talent
♦ Provide a ‘fresh’ user-centered perspective
♦ Build strong team-work and consensus-building skills
♦ Cross-training and re-training within organizations

Conclusions

Employers are increasingly seeking candidates with hybrid skill sets of both traditional and technical skills.

Successful candidates can demonstrate a portfolio of coursework, practical experience, technical expertise, and networking contacts creating a strong foundation and basic professional support system that they bring with them to the organization.

Development of future digital library leaders requires a strategic mix of theory and introduction to communities of practice; best fostered by developing partnerships between new librarians and library digitization centers.

Through experiential learning, students benefit from expanding their technological acumen with specific systems, while modeling and developing essential soft skills like teamwork, communication, and decision-making.

Key to these programs is the element of mentorship that elevates the experience beyond work training.