

Webology, Volume 3, Number 3, September, 2006

Home	Table of Contents	Titles & Subject Index	Authors Index
----------------------	-----------------------------------	--	-------------------------------

Information Professional: Knowledge and Skills Development for Serving Marginalized and Rural Communities

[Greg Chester](#)

Former Library Director, Leech Lake Tribal College, Cass Lake, MN, USA.

E-mail: gchester@charter.net

[A. Neelameghan](#)

Regional Advisor for Asia Pacific (retired), formerly UNESCO/PGI, Paris,

France. E-mail: anm2002@vsnl.net

Received September 1, 2006; Accepted September 30, 2006

Abstract

This paper discusses the types of knowledge, skills, and experience that an information professional (IP) needs to acquire within and outside the formal library and information science curriculum so as to be able to generate information products and services to satisfy the needs of marginalized communities (indigenous and rural communities), effectively manage marginalized community knowledge, as well as empower and improve the information literacy of members of the community. Communication skills and knowledge of the history, culture and language of the communities are discussed as are focused self-designed programs and the application of appropriate information communication technologies in support of out-reach work. Some modalities for training IPs are suggested based on our experiences.

Keywords

Rural community; Marginalized community; Information needs study; Information professional; Education and training; Curriculum design; Knowledge and skills; Communication skills; Community knowledge management; Outreach services

Background

The goal of education in information studies (IS) is to develop professionals equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide services that satisfy the information needs of information seekers, through effective management of information and knowledge resources. Additionally, it is to enable them undertake research and development so as to contribute to the continuous development of the field - theories, and techniques. The basis of such service and research thereof can be the *Five Laws of Library Science* ([Ranganathan, 1931](#)).

The core of education and skill development in IS, at the graduate and post-graduate levels, is common to most categories of information professionals. In addition to this core, there may be selective fields of specialization (electives) and supporting studies in cognate

subjects. This pattern and trend appears to be fairly common in many library and information science (LIS) curricula (cf. survey reported in [Hallam, Partridge & McAllister, 2004](#)). The pattern and trend of changes in LIS education is similar in emerging economies / developing countries too.

From our experience, we believe that there are communities - rural and marginalized communities - in developing as well as in developed countries whose information needs are not adequately met and consequently they have not been able to productively participate in the development process and enjoy the benefits thereof. Equity and justice requires that any programme for socio-economic development, whether general or in a specific sector, should cover and benefit all sections of the society, irrespective of race, caste, colour, religion, culture and other social, economic or political differences. Members of these communities, as they live close to nature and have a stake in the preservation and nurturing of nature and its offerings, acquire a wealth of knowledge about their environment that could be of value to the greater good of the nation state they live in. [Agrawal](#) (1995) asserts that the differentiation between indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge is invidious and the divide between them as perceived by some authors should be 'dismantled' (see also: [Seshia, Garoupa, Lenzer & Gulati](#), (eds.), 2003; [Sillitoe](#), 2000; [Antweiler](#), 1998; [Evers & Gerke](#), 2003).

Such community knowledge is largely of the tacit kind. The careful and judicious management and wider application of community knowledge should become an essential component of knowledge management (KM), the latter now being largely confined to corporate and institutional management ([Neelameghan](#), 2006). The application of KM to community knowledge is an area that needs to be developed and courses in IS should include it. It is also to be remembered that very few of the marginalized community members visit libraries or other information centres. Information professionals and their intermediaries if used should reach out and assist community members. Some related aspects are: (1) to identify the information they need and/or enable them to identify the types of information they may need; (2) to provide them the information they need / seek and/or assist them to identify and use appropriate information sources (including experts and other human resources); (3) to enable them to evaluate the information available or provided in relation to the purpose on hand; (4) to enhance the community's information literacy, and (5) assist them to use information and communication devices for inter-personal as well wider global communication.

Scope of the Paper

This paper will discuss the types of knowledge, skills, and experience that an information professional needs to acquire within and beyond or outside the formal IS curriculum to satisfy the needs of marginalized communities (indigenous and rural communities), effectively manage marginalized community knowledge, and also empower and improve the information literacy of members of the community. These suggestions are based on our experiences ([Neelameghan & Chester](#), 2006).

What Additional Knowledge and Skills

1 Background Knowledge

"This understanding of the 'indigenous' is the beginning of what may be a more fruitful engagement with the question of 'liberalising' . . ." ([Sarangapani](#), 2003; p. 256). For providing appropriate information services to all sections of the indigenous marginalized communities, for empowering them, and improving literacy level, it is necessary to have / acquire background knowledge about the communities. LIS students and professionals and

those with and through whom (intermediaries) they plan to work need to have or acquire some knowledge of the

- language / dialect of the local indigenous communities;
- their culture and cultural practices;
- history;
- geography and local environment; for example ethnobotany;
- relation of the people to the local environment;
- food and raw materials they extract from their territory for use by themselves and for trade with other indigenous communities and the industrial world;
- legal and historic relationships with their indigenous neighbours and with the nation state or states they reside within; and
- their systems of governance and decision-making within the family, community, and nation.

Furthermore, one needs to survey / ask:

- what do they want from the nation state and the technological societies?
- what do they do not want from the nation state and the technological societies and why they do not want them?
- what is their literacy rate and what languages and written systems are they literate in?
- what is the education offered locally, in what language and culture, and how many of their people are exposed to it and at/to what year or age?
- what do they have in the way of infrastructure, electricity, sewerage, water, roads, transportation, cable communication, wireless communication, radio, television, etc.?
- what technology and educational resources do they already have? and
- what are the barriers to effective communication and exchange?

This will inspire respect by the information professional (IP) for the knowledge of the indigenous people and also enable the IP to work more closely with people in their environments. This type of planned interaction with community members and reaching out to them through appropriate information services and products will enable the IP to identify relevant information sources and build useful document collections, catalogue and develop subject indexes to facilitate information retrieval, knowledge organization, and vocabulary management with reference to the users.

2 Communication Skills

The IP need not become an expert in any of these fields, but needs to become skilled enough to enable positive communication and facilitate the exchange of ideas and provide appropriate information. It will support positive mutual changes in attitudes and perceptions. Getting to know certain key people in the community and how to communicate effectively with them as well as working well within their socio-political, economic, and culture systems is very important. Even if the IP is later assigned to a different community, a great deal of the knowledge is transferable, within limits of course, to other indigenous communities.

3 Information and Communication Technologies Applications

It is well-known that the digital divide - between urban communities and rural / marginalized communities - is more pronounced in developing countries than in developed countries. Yet ICT application to empower people is seen as the path to bridging the digital divide and support the socio-economic and cultural development of rural, indigenous and

marginalized communities. Experience shows that the extension of wireless technology, spreading the use of cell phones, community radio services, use of audio, video and multimedia, establishment of telecentres, and information kiosks can help overcome problems of using different scripts and languages / dialects and eventually bridge the digital divide, and develop a more fully informed and knowledgeable citizenry. This will also facilitate the recording and collection of indigenous knowledge of rural and marginalized community members. LIS courses should have sufficient content and devote necessary time to assist interested students in this regard. These students, in their subsequent professional career, will be able to provide better and more innovative services to the indigenous now marginalized communities. Continuing education programs covering these and related topics directed toward IPs are also necessary and departments / schools of LIS can play important roles in organizing and conducting such programs.

4 Focused, Self-Designed Courses

Students may also take elective and self-designed courses as well as courses in cognate subjects, in consultation with the faculty, that may be included in each student's program. The credit hours and costs can vary based on each situation. Self-designed courses may be necessary, as it is not likely that there will be formal courses for students going to rural and indigenous villages. The students will need to be matched with a fluent elder or an experienced adult (intermediary) who will take responsibility for language instruction combined with the "total immersion" experience in the community of fluent speakers. The intermediary may need to be bi-lingual and may also teach culture, history, and ethnobotany as the student (IP) becomes more fluent in the language. We cannot expect miracles in one-, two-, three-, and even four-month programs. The student will, at best, get an exposure to and an overview of each of these areas and can acquire more in-depth knowledge and experience later as he/she gets an opportunity to work with the communities.

Another possibility is a program similar to the "*Peace Corps*". However, while the primary focus of the "*Peace Corps*" is on the participant teaching others, in this program the participant's primary focus is on learning from the people with whom he/she is partnered over a one to two year period. The participant can also share information and skills with the people so that the experience can be mutually beneficial. In these approaches, the use of case studies will promote learning and knowledge acquisition. The program proposed here will not only benefit the Indigenous and rural communities wherein students or IPs are assigned, but will provide for the greater good of the nation state in which they reside. These marginalized communities do possess knowledge, skills, and understandings that can be of great benefit to the larger community. The IP can assist, through interactions and exchanges with the marginalized communities, in drawing upon the tacit and unrecorded knowledge of the communities. At the same time, the larger community has the responsibility to reciprocate for receiving these benefits.

Conclusion

We have discussed the types of knowledge, skills, and experience that information professionals need to acquire within and outside the formal information studies curriculum to enable them prepare information products and services that satisfy the needs of marginalized communities (indigenous and rural communities), effectively manage and draw from the tacit knowledge possessed by these communities, and also empower and improve the information literacy of members of such communities. The additions or modifications to Education in Information Studies program suggested here is designed to prepare a corps of knowledgeable professionals who can facilitate this education and information sharing process to the benefit of all parties concerned.

References

- Agrawal, A. (1995). Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge. *Development and Change*, 26(3), 413-429.
- Antweiler, C. (1998). Local knowledge and local knowing: an anthropological analysis of contested "cultural products" in the context of development. *Anthropos*, 93(4-6), 46-94.
- Evers, H.-D., & Gerke, S. (2003). [Local and global knowledge: social science research on Southeast Asia](#). *Southeast Asian Studies*, Working paper No. 18, p.1-19. Bonn, 2003. Retrieved September 25, 2006, from http://www.uni-bonn.de/~hevers/papers/Evers-Gerke2003-Local_Global_Knowledge.pdf
- Hallam, G., Partridge, H., & McAllister, L. (2004). LIS education in changing times. *Malaysian Journal of Library and Information Science*, 8(2), 53-65.
- Neelameghan, A. (2006). E-communities, community knowledge and knowledge management. *KnowGenesis, International Journal of Technical Communication*, 1(2), 21-27.
- Neelameghan, A., & Chester, Greg (2006). [Environmental knowledge and marginalized communities: the last mile connectivity](#). *Webology*, 3(1), Article 24. Retrieved September 25, 2006, from <http://www.webology.org/2006/v3n1/a24.html>
- Ranganathan, S.R. (1931). *Five laws of library science*. Madras Library Association.
- Sarangapani, P.M. (2003). *Constructing school knowledge: an ethnography of learning in an Indian village*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Seshia, S., Garoupa, C., Lenzer, B., & Gulati, N. (eds.) (2003). *Traditional wisdom in natural resources management: the only way to conserve*. Dehra Dun, India: Rural Litigation & Entitlement Kendra.
- Sillitoe, P. (2000). [Globalising indigenous knowledge](#). *ASA2000 Conference, SOAS* April 2000. Retrieved September 25, 2006, from http://www.asa2000.anthropology.ac.uk/sillitoe/sillitoe_paper.html

Bibliographic information of this paper for citing:

Chester, G. & Neelameghan, A. (2006). "Information Professional: Knowledge and Skills Development for Serving Marginalized and Rural Communities." *Webology*, 3(3), Article 29. Available at: <http://www.webology.org/2006/v3n3/a29.html>

Alert us when: [New articles cite this article](#)

Copyright © 2006, Greg Chester & A. Neelameghan