

Special Forum: Best Professional Development Experiences, Spring 2014

An excellent opportunity to “think bigger” about professional development came my way when I served for a few years on ATLA’s Professional Development Committee, at the time of its formation. It was an exciting challenge to convene with other ATLA colleagues and ask the most wide-open questions imaginable, such as:

- “What sort of professional development do our fellow theological librarians need?”
- “What resources are in place to help them meet those needs?”
- “What can our committee do to help?”

There is much to be said for programs, events, strategies, and other more formally conceived plans for professional development, and our libraries do well to think creatively about this. At the same time, that’s only a small segment of where professional development happens. For those who are alive to them, opportunities for professional development are constant and limitless. There isn’t a single workday that doesn’t offer some room for growth.

It was precisely with this in mind that I posted the invitation (“Tell us about your best professional development experience...”) to ATLANTIS earlier this year, with the hope of bringing to the surface some individual high points and reflections from our own varied experiences.

What follows is an ensemble of reflections from within our community. As you’ll see right away, they represent vividly how varied our work situations and our experiences of professional development are. I am so glad I posted this question.

The Power of Networks and Associations (Jim Pakala)

Engagement with certain organizations of libraries constitutes my most valuable professional development experience in Theological Librarianship.

The three most important of these organizations have been the American Theological Library Association, its regional group SEPTLA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Theological Library Association), and, since 1998, MOBIUS (which formerly stood for “Missouri Bibliographic Information User System”). MOBIUS is the most dynamic of my organizational commitments, owing to the very close interlibrary activity. As of 2014, the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries and MOBIUS are partnering to share via a courier service the books of all the member libraries of both organizations.

A key component of my professional development has been serving on the boards of these organizations as well as some others. Additionally, involvement with various chaplaincies, local clergy, and the Church has proved valuable. If time and funds permitted, I would prefer Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) meetings, and I know that some ATLA colleagues are active members of those organizations.

Long-time ATLA member Sharon Taylor and I have over the years remarked, half-jokingly, that the ATLA conference was the highlight of our year. For professional development in theological librarianship, ATLA stands head and shoulders above everything else. (*James C. Pakala is Library Director at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO.*)

The ATLANTIS Listserv as a Professional Development Resource (Becca Butler)

As a new theological librarian, my best professional development has been through the kindness, generosity, and collegiality I have found on the ATLANTIS listserv. My experience with the listserv began during my Theological Librarianship class at Dominican University when my professor (Melody Layton McMahon) encouraged me to seek out answers to my research question through the listserv members.

The wealth of information and the responses I received made me feel welcome as a new librarian in the field and contributed in important ways to a successful paper that eventually found its way into *Theological Librarianship*. Now

in this first year of my fellowship, I have returned to the listserv again and again to ask questions of my own, or to read answers that other librarians have posted. Nearly every discussion has led to a deeper understanding of my vocation as a theological librarian, or, at the very least, has pointed me in the direction of new and better resources. (*Rebecca A. Butler is Visiting Assistant Professor of Library Services at the Christopher Center for Library & Information Resources, Valparaiso University.*)

Discovering Vocational Clarity in a Theological Librarianship Course (Jim Darlack)

Not long ago, in a conversation with a friend after church, I mentioned to him that I had decided to stick with being a librarian. I explained that it seemed to be a good fit for my personality and interests, and that while there was no shortage of folks in the world with doctoral degrees in biblical studies, there was an ongoing need for theological librarians. His rejoinder — “Are you disappointed?” — might have been disheartening, had I had not already asked myself the same question. And to be honest, it wasn’t that long ago that it was easy for me to see my decision to pursue library science as a retreat from my original plan of pursuing a doctorate with the objective of teaching biblical studies.

Thankfully, taking this course (Theological Librarianship - LIS 590TL) has helped me see that my decision, while a change in direction, is no retreat. Three aspects of our course material helped change my mind: (1) the rich heritage of theological librarianship, (2) the perception of theological librarianship as ministry, and (3) the contribution of librarians to theological education.

There can be a certain pride in taking one’s place among the ranks of the theological librarians. We stand in line with the giants in our faith. Jerome, Cassiodorus, Harnack, and others had a hand in shaping the theological education of their day, and in some cases they helped set the course of Western Civilization.

While the legacy of those who have gone before us is affirming in its own right, the literature we care for holds a mystique as well. We are responsible for connecting the church in our time with the witnesses of the past. We help multiply experience in our seminaries, facilitating interaction with a diversity of views unhindered by geographical or temporal distance.

In taking this course, it has been interesting to hear and read the perceptions that theological librarians have of the profession. Some have viewed it simply as a job. Others, however, have perceived their work as the answer to a call to ministry: a vocation in the original sense of that word. One author describes the theological library as “the memory of the body of Christ.” Another has stated that “theological librarianship is at its best a ministry,” since the theological librarian is not simply concerned with the collections and their care, but has a chance to minister to patrons as they come through the library.

It is important to see ourselves as having an active role in theological education. Our choices in collections, efficiency in circulation, exactness in technical services, and aid in reference all help shape the students’ educational experience. Regardless of our specific duties, or our official status within the institution, we serve best when we see ourselves as serving an integral role in the educational process. We bear primary responsibility for selecting the resources that our students will engage. We help set the atmosphere in which learning takes place. We build the intellectual scaffolding of the seminary’s collection with our cataloging and extend the reach of the faculty into one-on-one reference consultations online or over the phone.

My own theological education began in bible college, responding to God’s call on my life to help teach his word to his people. This calling led to further academic pursuits in seminary. Never did I foresee that I would become a librarian. It has been encouraging during this course to learn how librarianship fits into a historical context as well as into the context of theological education. My perception of theological librarianship as a ministry has helped to shape the way I go about my day-to-day duties. And so I can answer the question, “Are you disappointed?” with a resounding “no.” While my decision to become a librarian was a change in direction, it is not in any sense a retreat. (*Jim Darlack is Assistant Librarian for Reference & Bibliographic Instruction, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA.*)

Student Work Experience and Vocational Formation (Don Day)

On your question of “What has been my most valuable professional development experience for theological librarianship?” My first thought was the traditional workshop/seminar, but I admit I’d not been stretched theologically by those otherwise excellent events. But I then recalled where the rubber really hit the road. I’d been recently explaining to a new batch of international students something about my experience of calling, and formulated the following in hindsight.

Growing up, I attended a small, rural Baptist church. I was baptized there, and just down the hill from where it stands, there is a small library, where I worked as a teenager. I knew God was speaking to me when I went to church; if God was speaking to me while I was working at the library, I did not understand, at the time.

Library work helped pay my bills from my undergraduate days through two additional Master’s degrees. But it was not until I finished a Master of Library Science that I found full-time paid professional employment. I started then to understand what I had only suspected before; that God had been saying something to me at the library when I was younger. He had been telling me, even when I was working as a teenager, that He could use the skills I had learned in the library.

I believe God has made it His business’ consider my desires, but to satisfy the needs of others, for His own good purposes. (*Don Day is Director of Library and Information Services, B. H. Carroll Theological Institute, Arlington TX.*)

The Power of Improvisation (Anna Lois Kroll)

I have found through the years that professional development is something that happens gradually, as one gains experience in one or another area, or something that happens over a shorter period of time, when one becomes involved in a project or goes to a workshop or conference. For me, the most visibly rewarding experience I had that resulted in my development professionally was setting up a library for Irpine Seminary, located right outside of Kiev, Ukraine, in 1999. I worked with one of our graduates who teaches there and taught him how to maintain the collection once I was gone. I had to figure out how to take what I use here and fit it into their situation. Such factors as the inconsistency of their electrical power had to be taken into consideration. The students were so grateful to be able to finally have access to the books that they lined up one morning when my assistant and I came to work on the library and each of them shook our hands as we walked up to the door of the building. The library is still functional, and I developed a lasting friendship with our graduate with whom I worked.

P.S. I almost deleted your e-mail but reconsidered when I read. “This could be fun” at the end of your message. So I thought about it, and this experience came to mind as one of the biggest highlights of my career that might be fun for others to hear about. I could list a number of other experiences, but this one was certainly very satisfying and was one of those few times in a cataloger’s career where the results could be seen so clearly and poignantly. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to share. (*Anna Lois Kroll is Cataloger at The Master’s Seminary, Sun Valley, CA.*)

The Power of Kindness and Personal Affirmation (Tony Amodeo)

A long, long time ago, I was at an early point in my career in giving instruction sessions (a.k.a. bibliographic instruction). This was not something that library school had prepared me for (an unfortunate shortcoming of many LIS programs at the time), and my first attempt was a disaster (I simply read my notes to the class). My second attempt was better (this time, I used notes without simply reading them verbatim), but eventually I found out about a group of librarians who met at UCLA regularly to discuss instruction issues at the California Conference on Library Instruction South (now SCIL, a section of the California Academic & Research Libraries Association). Their meetings were a great help to me, as were their occasional programs. The spirit of cooperative learning, the sharing of experiences, and the problem solving were invaluable. I got to know, learn from, and befriend some of the pioneers and eventual national leaders in library instruction. Gradually, my class sessions began to improve. I went as far as to take speech and beginning acting classes to help with voice projection and presentation.

And yet I still felt that I wasn’t getting through as a teacher.

One day, I mentioned my misgivings to the late Herbert Ryan, S.J., an outstanding teacher, scholar, and noted peritus (theological advisor) at the Second Vatican Council. He put his arm around my shoulders, looked at me, and said, “Tony, you’re a natural-born teacher.” I certainly didn’t feel like one, and my response at first was that he was simply trying to shore up what was left of my diminishing confidence.

And yet somehow that became a moment that stayed with me. It planted a seed of hope, and also set down a challenge that I have carried with me all these years: to live up to his confidence that I could, someday, be the teacher I wanted to be. (*Tony Amodeo is Associate Librarian, Reference & Instruction, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.*)

Being “Over One’s Head” as a Professional Development Opportunity (Leslie A. Engelson)

Most librarians love to learn. They are drawn to opportunities to see a new perspective, gain some understanding, or attain knowledge in an area previously unknown or little known.

Very likely this is what draws us to librarianship, as there are few other professions that allow people to indulge in what delights them. But just because we like to learn doesn’t mean it’s always easy to do so.

As a cataloger, it is important for me to have at least some knowledge of the subjects engaged by the resources I catalog so that I can assign accurate subject headings and classification numbers. It follows that much of my professional development happens as a matter of course as part of my daily work. Not only do I learn about the subjects of the resources I catalog, but over time I get better at applying the tools of my trade.

This often includes developing proficiencies with a variety of technological tools. I must confess that when it comes to technology, I often struggle to learn it on my own. It is mentally exhausting, it is time consuming, and there is often no one around to ask for help. Also, there are always plenty of other important tasks at hand, things I can usefully pursue instead of tackling some new technological challenge.

A couple years ago, however, I knew it was time to stop putting it off and learn how to use MarcEdit. I had been hearing about what a time-saving tool it is when a cataloger is dealing with a high volume of records. Since my “internal motivation” was somewhat lacking, I looked for an “external motivation” and found it when my proposal for teaching a MarcEdit workshop for the ATLA Annual Conference was accepted.

I enjoy teaching, especially in a hands-on learning environment, and was looking forward to teaching this workshop. Now all I needed to do was learn how to use MarcEdit. With that external motivation driving me, I downloaded the latest version of the software, gathered a small file of MARC records, and started reading the Help files and watching tutorials. I rolled my sleeves up and threw myself into the challenge. I clicked buttons, hit a number of frustrating dead-ends, and made something work without quite knowing how. Eventually, the fog of confusion began to dissipate as the warm light of understanding and knowledge began to break through.

By the time I taught the workshop, I felt reasonably confident in using a variety of tools available in the MarcEdit suite. It was exciting and satisfying to demonstrate its functionality, and to witness firsthand some of those “aha!” moments that every teacher longs to be part of. I’m quite proud of myself for accomplishing at least a minimal level of competency on my own, and have grown in confidence in my ability to take on whatever I need to in order to serve the constituents of my library. (*Leslie A. Engelson is Metadata Librarian/Assistant Professor, Waterfield Library, Murray State University, Murray, KY.*)

Conclusion

Such a lively and intriguing discussion helps us to clarify some useful principles:

- that a truly memorable “Best Professional Development Experience” brings together the right scenario for the right person. What’s formative or even career defining for one person would not be for someone else.

- our need to be, as much as possible, in a perpetual state of growth and learning ourselves. The experiences described above represent many different career stages. And it's difficult to think of a working environment that is as conducive to constant encounters with new ways of thinking as are ours.
- the benefit of taking every available opportunity to hear what sources have nourished and sustained the vocations of trusted colleagues. Resources for "formal" professional development programs vary so much from one institution to another. But in reading the accounts shared here, it's striking how great a role is played by everyday work experience. This affirms that the way we engage new challenges — being honest enough with ourselves to accept that we must somehow acquire new capacities in order to rise to those challenges — is close to the heart of the vocational growth we all need.

Our thanks to all who participated.