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Critical Aspects of the Professional Socialization of Freshmen Library School Students

Helge Høivik
Centre for Educational Research and Developments
Oslo University College

Abstract

In this paper we present material from a 10-year investigation into aspects of professional socialization of library school students. Two surveys of entrants to one school of library training were conducted each year 1995/96-1998/99 and once again in 2004/05. The students answered questions about their previous motivation to become librarians and their current preferences for work. The data indicates that freshmen are quickly socialized to entertain a more professional, but also a modernist and thus out-dated concept of the librarianship.

The Internet Challenge

While the daily time spent on books has remained stable over the last ten years in Norway, the use of journals, magazines and newspapers declined. At the same time, browsing and otherwise using the Internet has become dominant [SSB 2005]. Other media channels are also in flux.
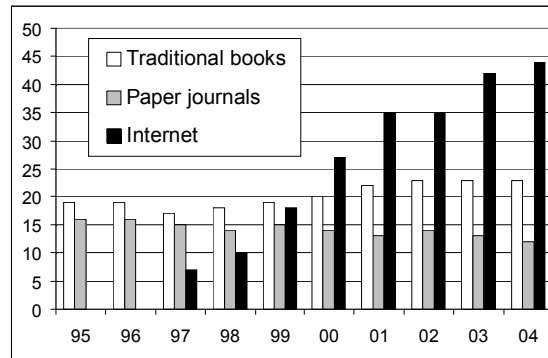
50
45 ☐ Traditional books
40
35 ☐ Paper journals
30
25 ■ Internet
20
15
10
5
0
95 96 97 98 99 00 01 02 03 04

Figure 1: *Share of the Norwegian population that spent time reading books, paper journals and use the Internet "on an average day" 1995-2004.*

The Internet is not only an agent of change and challenge to newspaper publishing and the music and movie industries, but also to higher education, scholarly work and librarianship. The library finds and must define itself as a functional player in this process of relocation of texts from the medium of print to digital forms and formats. Such developments do not hinge on the disappearance of books and paper journals. It is rather that these formats play increasingly different and – in some cases - subsidiary roles. The problem translates to new requirements for the teaching of *information* or *document competencies* in general and to the curricular profile of library education in particular. It is the latter that interests us here.

In entry-level jobs, professionals work according to guidelines, procedures and standards. At the higher end they must be able to exercise strategic thinking, discretion and judgment in complex, uncertain and varied contexts. Professional training must cover appropriation and application as well as expansion, modification and evaluation of a distinct body of knowledge and operational capabilities. Good professional education is rooted in the past where the profession developed, but is pro-active to identify new challenges in the direction where the profession is headed.

 In this respect the syllabus, reference lists and other texts that describe a particular line of professional study provide formal points of entry to the topics taught. But those descriptions should not be taken at face value only. They do not catch another level of training that is important, but less explicit. It is commonly referred to as the *hidden curriculum* [Haralambos 1991].

The hidden curriculum can be described by those approaches, perceptions and values that students appropriate as part of the study experience as such, rather than the stated educational objectives. We may also refer to this as the socialization of would-be professionals. An important part is played by the initiations that freshmen experience during their first months of study.

Most students excel in this exercise. Through the 12 years or so of previous schooling they have developed an acute ability to decode teachers, general expectations and "what the whole thing is about". Sharing such insights is a popular pastime in the student canteen.

In calm waters, the potential discrepancy between official policy and factual experiences may go unnoticed. In times of change, though, the educational institution may experience tensions between old and new approaches. This was the case during the modernization of Norwegian teacher education after World War II. Due to the pressures of digitalization it has also been a

well-known issue in Library and Information Science courses all over the world for the last 20 years.

In this study we try to identify pointers to the hidden curriculum at one school of library studies in light of the Internet challenge. We are concerned with the cultural impact that the first half-year of training has on beginner students.

Self-report on motives and interests

Our methodological approach is inspired by a feature of individual auto-biography, e.g. the stories that individuals may tell about their own past. Such stories have interactional and representational functions. They are efforts to present and paint images of self. Such constructions are responsive to culturally shared images and values. The individual is induced to reinterpret the personal past when surrounded by new the cultural pointers of the present.
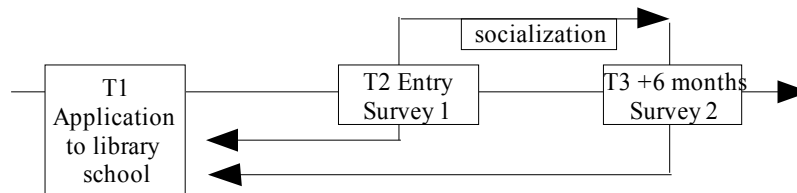

Figure 2: *The timeline above has three points: Application to library school (T1),*
start of 1ˢᵗ semester (T2) and six months study experience (T3).
Surveys were conducted at T2 and T3 with reference to T1

The effects of socialization may express themselves as differences in students' appraisal of professionalism at various stages of their training. When these profiles remain unchanged, the students' entry values are in accordance with the direction of early socialization. They remain stable or are uniformly strengthened. The two may also be unrelated. But if the profiles are changing in opposing ways, we will take this as an index to the strength and direction of freshman socialization.

New students apply for library school in spring (T1 in Figure 2). If successful they begin school the following September. We therefore asked beginner students about their reasons to apply at the time of entry to school (T2) and then again six months later (T3). The procedure was repeated each year 1995-98 and once again in 2004. This resulted in a time series where each cohort was represented with two sets of data. These were used to compute motivational profiles[1]. Variations between the years 95-98 were close enough to compute averages[2].

The students were asked to tick off the three most relevant reasons for why they had sent their application to library school. They could choose from alternatives phrased as *I want to work* ..

- *with people* (PEOPLE)

- *in a nice/friendly work environment* (NICE)

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[1] The two surveys were conducted each year from1995/96-1998/99 with additional data collected in 2004/2005. The response rate varied in the 85-95 per cent range. 100-120 students responded in the first round and 90-100 in the second. Based on preliminary data from the Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo University College 1 out of 3 students drops out over the course during the three years of study [SPS 2005]. Questionnaires were distributed, completed and retrieved during class sessions.

[2] Differences are usually in the 2%-5% range.

- *in a cultural institution* (CULTURE)

- *with fictional literature* (FICT)

- *with mediation of knowledge* (KNOW)

- *with non-fictional literature* (NONF)

- *with information technologies* (TEH)

Figure 3 shows that work with *knowledge* and to work *in a cultural institution* dominate responses. With a slight reduction, this is also the case in 2004. At the same time, and somewhat counter intuitively, less than 20% had wanted to work with non-fictional literature.
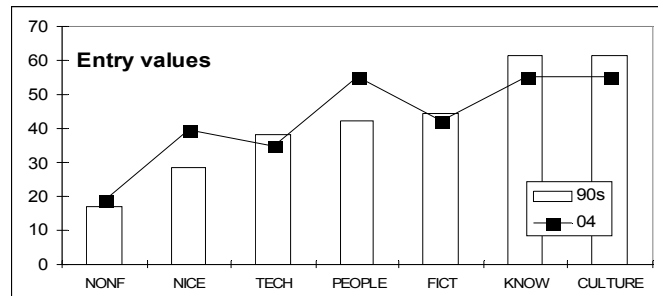

Figure 3: Student motivation to become librarians: Average values 1995-98 (bar) and the year 2004 (line).

Work with *information technologies* had a score in the middle range, but went slightly down in 2004. Work *with people* went remarkably up. To be employed in *a nice/friendly environment* was also more popular that year.

Six months later some of these alternatives received markedly different weights. Close to half the students initially reported that *work with fictional literature* had been one of their motives to apply. After six months the proportion was down 15%. This downward tendency was weakened in 2004 - down only 8%. From this we conclude that entry to library school did have a quick effect on students' perception of the profession. But before we look at more of these tendencies, we will describe some relevant aspects of their background.
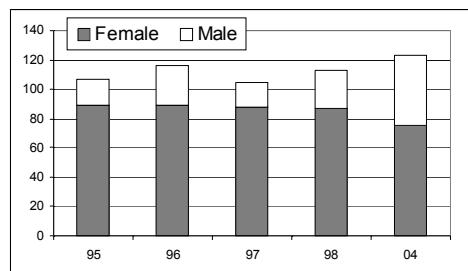
Student backgrounds

**Figure 4 Number and gender of respondents.
4 out of 5 students were female.**

Most of the students are young female adults[3] with little previous experience with library work[4].
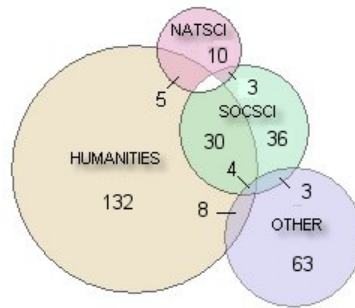

Figure 5: Previous education in absolute number of students and as the weight of their credit points (circle size). 2 out of 3 students had higher education, but only 1 in 10 had obtained a bachelors or masters degree.

Many students had some participated in higher education before. The most popular of these earlier studies were foreign languages, literature, art, history and other fields of the humanities. Sociology, anthropology, psychology and other social science subjects were also in fashion.

This differs from the general student population of Norway. Far more are oriented towards the humanities and remarkably few have tried their hands at teacher training before they study librarianship[5].

Between 2 and 3 out of 10 students had a PC at home in the late 90ies, while practically everyone was thus equipped in 2004. 15-20% of them had access to the Internet from their homes - increasing to 60% in 2004. This mirrors developments within the population at large in Norway [SSB 2004].
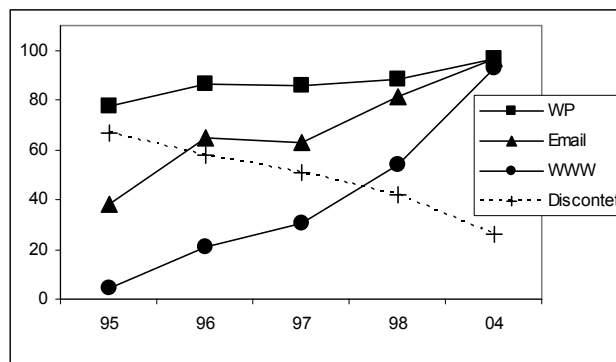

Figure 6: Students' digital competencies at entry and their appraisal of the operational training offered by library school. In 1995 80% could use a word processor, while nobody knew how to browse the Internet. In 2004 everybody has these capabilities.

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[3] In 95-98 around 80% were female down to 60% in 2004. Close to 55% of all students were in the 20-24 year range in 95-98 down to 40% in 2004

[4] 8% had worked in a library for 1-3 years and 2% more than 3 years.

[5] Based on national statistics from the Norwegian bureau of census (Norway Statistics – SSB).

We asked the students about their digital competencies when they started school and after six months (see Figure 6). In the first period most of them knew how to use word processors, but not email and even less how to navigate the World Wide Web. In 2004 everybody had these capabilities. We also recorded their satisfaction level with operational training in these fields. During the first years a majority were clearly dissatisfied. But there is a strong negative correlation. The more students knew when they started, the less discontent they expressed. We may reformulate this with a bit more stinginess: In the decade 1995-2005 beginner students did indeed learn to operate a computer during their first months of study, while formal training towards this end was perceived as not very helpful.

To summarize: *The young female adults in our study did not differ in significant ways from the average student population in Norway except for a markedly stronger orientation towards the humanities and a weak orientation to teaching/pedagogics. They were not unfamiliar with, but neither particularly recruited to shoulder the digital challenges to the library profession.*

Socialization

As stated above, the data from four consecutive years indicate a reversal of one initial and naive impression of librarianship. 45% of the beginners reported that they had wanted to become librarians in order to pursue their interest in fictional literature. Six months later only 30% said that this had been the case.

We initially look at the entry values as shown in Figure 7. This describes the averages of reported motives for the 1995-98 period[6]. In addition to the dominant interest in *working with mediation of knowledge*, around 40% checked off *for working with people*, in *an institution of culture* and with *information technologies*, while 30% mentioned *nice/friendly workplace* as one of their motives.

Superimposed on this graph are data from 2004 that show some significant changes. Clearly more students report that they were motivated by the library as *a nice/friendly cultural institution* where one may work with *people*.
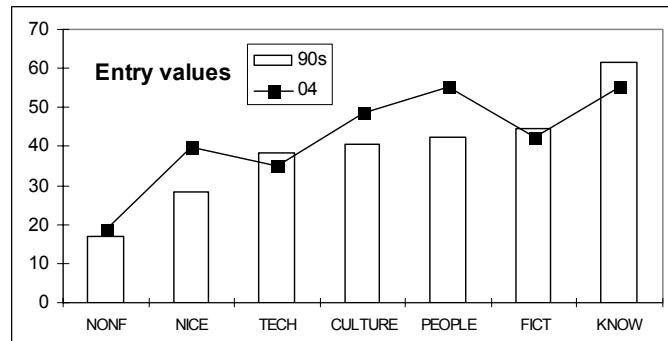

Figure 7: Students' motivations: Entry values.
The highest score was initially given to *work with knowledge*.

Turning to the reported motivational *changes* within each cohort, we get this picture:
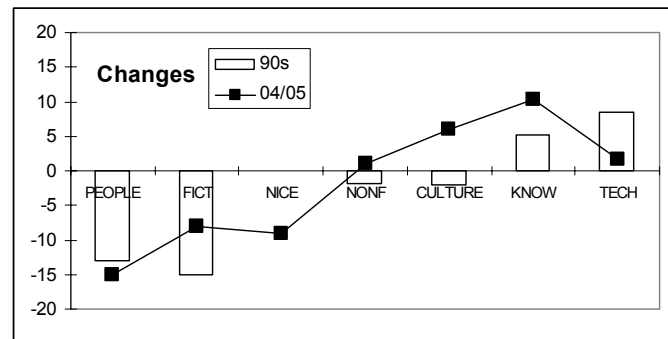

Figure 8: Students' motivations: Changed values. There is a marked downturn for working with *fictional literature* and *with people*, and a smaller upturn for working with *knowledge* and *information technology*. But this the latter effect disappears in 2004.

Over six months in the 95/96-98/99 period (the bars in Figure 8) the preferences *cultural work, non-fictional literature* in a *nice/friendly environment* remain basically the same, indicating that such dimensions of librarianship are moderately confirmed through the socialization process. The idea of libraries as a place to work *with people* and with *fictional literature* is discouraged while working with *information technology* is up 8% as is the *knowledge* dimension (up 5%).

These tendencies are changed one way or the other when we compare with the 2004/05 cohort. *Knowledge mediation* and *culture* are the new "winners" here. More remarkably is the

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[6] Variations each year in the 95-98 period is mostly between 2 and 5%, but on a few occasions between 5 and 10%.

increased interest in fictional literature. The somewhat strengthened interest in information technology during the 90ies more or less disappears.

Does this reinterpretation of their own motives impact students' preferences in relationship to the task and work profiles that are available to them as librarians? At the two different points in time we asked them what kind of tasks they would prefer to do if they were to take up work as librarians immediately. The available answers[7] were

- work at the reference desk/perform reference services (REF)

- classify and otherwise organize document collections (CLASS)

- provide non-fictional literature for pupils, students and professionals (FICT)

- develop information technology services (ICT)

- provide fictional literature to children, youngsters and adults (FICT)

The entry values to this question are in accordance with the previously recorded preferences. 50% of the beginner student wants to work with fictional literature – even more in 2004. Classification and work with information technology becomes less popular in 2004.
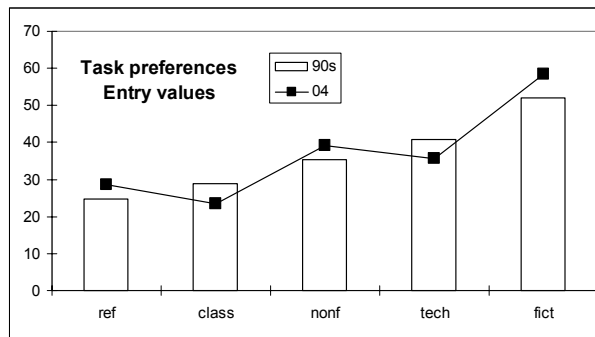

Figure 9 Entry values to students' task preferences.

The overall and dominant change over the first semester on these preferences is the sharply increased interest in *reference work* and – to a smaller extent – with *non-fictional material*, while *classification*, *fictional literature* and *technology* seems to be turn-offs.

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[7] The wording and choice of alternatives reflects the different character of the question, but were also made to reduce mechanical repetition of answers from one question to another.
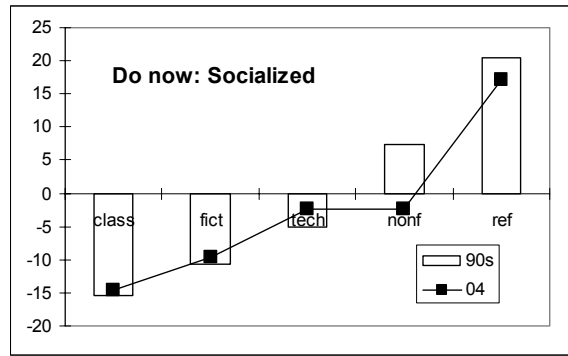
Figure 10: Change in students' task preferences indicating that library school induce a markedly greater interest in reference work, a markedly lesser interest in classification. The students' initial interest in working with digital services goes down.

Evaluation of ICT impact on the library.

A final set of questions was used to probe how the students felt that ICT would impact librarianship. Did they think that digital document forms would replace the medium of paper? They were given three alternative answers and asked to evaluate both public and teaching/research libraries 10 years into the future:

- the medium of paper print will prevail

- both forms play equal roles

- digital media becomes dominant

The students expressed the belief that the paper medium will lose its role in research libraries 10 years hence, but that it would still dominate or play an equal role to digital formats in public libraries.
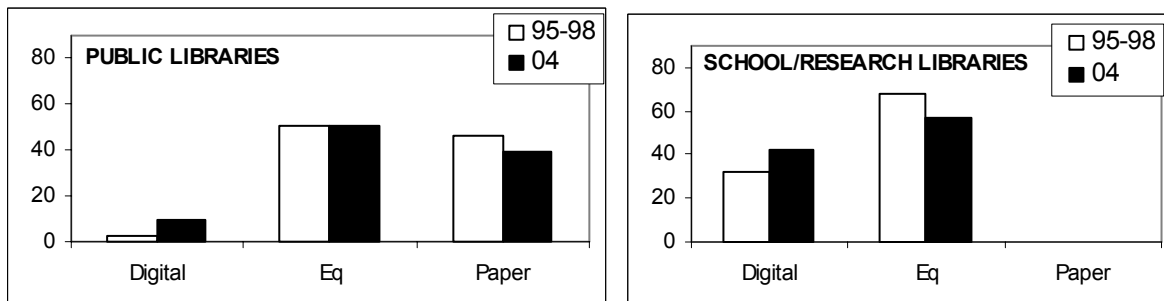

Figure 11 Perception of digital and print media in public and school/research libraries

The students were also asked to evaluate the treatment of the technological impact on librarianship. 1 in 3 students felt that too little or far too little weight was given to this issue in their curriculum.

Conclusion: Socialization to a modernist approach to librarianship.

The library school convey implicit and explicit messages to their freshmen students. Based on the previous presentation, we propose the following interpretation of the survey data:

1. The library school is perceived as strongly oriented towards the humanities and recruits students accordingly. Although it is reasonable to believe that libraries will be closely connected to learning and teaching in the future, few applicants seemed to have had a strong interest in teaching/pedagogics.

2. The school leads its beginner students to see the library not so much a literary as a knowledge-oriented institution. A concept of the training itself as literary study is discouraged, while the appropriation of knowledge-mediation capabilities is encouraged. This finds expression as a strengthened interest in reference work. A counter-intuitive trait is the apparent downgrade of interest in classification. But this may be explained by the otherwise strong motives to work with people and in a nice/friendly workplace. Reference services are patron-oriented, while classification is conceived as back-office activity.

3. The years 95-99 represent a critical time for the development and placement of institutional strategies in relationship to technological development. But the library school did not recruit students with particular competencies in this domain, even if an interest in ICT was present. Operational training was largely left to students themselves, giving a muddled message that ICT is not that important. The common expression at the time was that of ICT as a "mere tool" and not a reconfiguring technology. The interest in information technologies was somewhat strengthened in the 95-98 period, but this effect close to disappears in 2004/05.

4. The students wanted more in-depth treatment on the impact of ICT on librarianship. Their evaluation of the differences between public and learning/research libraries in a ten year perspective is commonsensical and problematic, but in an interesting way. In one sense they overvalue the impact of digitalization on research libraries. But this is not the case if we refer to the *library function* that is available for many and covering the widest possible range of topics, e.g. as currently available via the Internet. To see things in this light requires expansion, modification and evaluation of previously held professional concepts. 1/3 of the students felt that such analysis and discussion was undervalued in the curriculum.

We may safely conclude that the library school did indeed promote some images of librarianship to the detriment of others. What kinds?

To propose an answer, we need to align current and future librarianship with a more general theoretical perspective. The following provides us with a brief sketch:
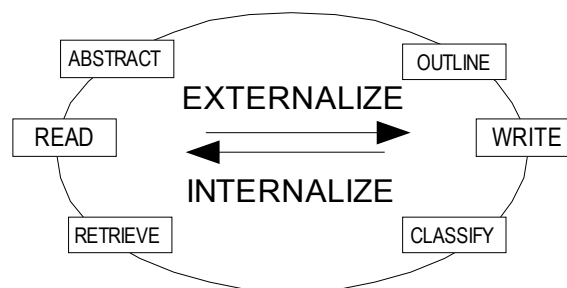

Figure 12: A model of mediated circle of discourse. The main loci are READ (externalise) and WRITE (internalise) with supportive functions like abstracting, outlining, classification and retrieval.

Written and otherwise mediated expressions (multimedia content, aural renditions etc.) circulate between social agents [Blackmore 1999]. Let us refer to this as engagements within *mediated circles of discourse.* Each circle has one expressive and one impressive (or adaptive) side. Participants take turns appropriating symbolic content produced by others, and they provide their own input. The latter may consist of mere reproductions or imitations. The reproduced texts may be cited and sometimes vulgarised. They are usually rephrased and may be augmented and extended leading to either *simple* or *extended* textual reproduction.

Of particular interest to the library profession are the loci of abstracting, outline and arrangement before and through the writing process, manual or automatic classification and subsequent retrieval. The latter two functions are required to maintain individual, institutional and global collections as exemplified by the (computer) "desktop", physical libraries and the World Wide Web respectively.

In this view, digitalisation may be seen as remediation of circles of discourse where content and behaviours related to an established set of media conventions are reworked and reinvented [Bolter 1991, Bolter and Grusin, 2000]. This view is circular and reproductive.

It stands opposed to a linear understanding with authors at one end of the line, readers at the other and the collections of textual materials somewhere between with the library as organizer and referee, - an intermediary in a unidirectional movement between author and reader. The opposing and circular view sees authors as readers, readers as authors and the library functions as inputs to an expanded reproduction of texts and a parallel and continues process of learning.

The move from a linear to a circular perspective is linked to digitalization. We will use 1980 as a watershed year. Up till then computers were something for the back office – also in the library. But computing literally exploded as the dominant technology the following years[8]. The two next decades saw the quick expansion of emailing, the World Wide Web and other features of the Internet[9] with dissemination to the public at large, - from wireless portables in the offices and homes of wealthy nations to whole streets of Internet cafes in the developing world. This process also made possible a previously unknown level of self-publishing, speeding up textual dissemination, turnover and re-use.

The overall effects of digitalization on the textual universe are not fully understood and socially digested. But they surely dwarf the impact of traditional libraries as vehicles of knowledge dissemination in the 21st century. Socialization of freshmen students to the basic images of the library should be considered in this light.

It is evident that professional schools are caretakers and proponents of professional identity and the execution of professional chores. In our case the replacement of a naïve image of librarianship as studies in (fictional) literature, is relevant and appropriate. The question is rather: What takes its place?

These surveys indicate that students are led to value the library as an institution of knowledge. This is operationalized as a strong emphasis on reference services, slight weight on digitalization as a "mere tool" and downplay of classification. The image of the library as a

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[8] Computing technology is in continuous development and therefore commonly referred to as "new" 60 years after its introduction.

[9] The Apple I computer (1976), the Visicalc spreadsheet (1979), the IBM PC (1981), TCP/IP (1983), World Wide Web (1989).

nice/friendly place to work *with people* is sustained, but not strongly linked to textual production. In our view this represents a pre-1980 and thus out-dated image of librarianship. We will refer to this as a modernist concept of the library.

To play any essential role in the processes of textual remediation, the library is in need of long-term and steady reinterpretations of its functions. We have framed the overall problem as an engagement within mediated circles of productive (i.e. "text-producing") discourse and emphasize the "information competency rectangle" with the four loci or corners of *abstracting*, *outlining*, *classification* and *retrieval*.

With the pervasiveness of Internet services, activities in these four domains are performed by end users with or without professional help. The latter may come packaged as library services, but may equally well come from commercial and Open Source communities.

To act as stewards to end user constituencies, the library and the librarian need to go one step beyond end user competencies.

Let us take classification as only one example. In a number of digital contexts there is need for development and implementation of classification schemes, e.g. the development of taxonomies and *ontologies* to use the terms of the trade. They are used to gain structure, overview and communication. These systems are "living" in the sense that they change with time and context. They do not work well universally, but must reflect the needs of localized practices in the sociological - not the geographical - sense of that term. The ability to classify and give name to new groups of entities is intrinsic to learning.

In this respect it seems critical that the students in our survey overvalue reference work that is an output function, and undervalue classification as a critical input. Libraries should not be detached from this core value-creating activity and become "specialists in finding stuff on the Internet" that is classified by others.

The students also seem to dissociate classification from their interest in *working with people* in a *nice/friendly atmosphere*, but such work for the Internet age could be precisely that. That would require a high level of both conceptual and operational digital expertise and a good grasp of the mechanics of extended knowledge reproduction

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