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A Cuban approach to “The role of IFLA in difussing profesional norms and standards”

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Abstract

Professional experiences received by Cuban librarians through IFLA’s conferences and other activities are presented. It is also sustained that IFLA’S material and economical aid for the adoption of norms and standards should be considered as part of the difussion of such recommendations. Cuban colleagues think that the Federation should take a stand in the conflicts of information policy that damage libraries and its readers, explaining their reasons, and that it should work to strengthen and develop Library Science as an independent discipline, because it studies a social phenomenon that has its own particular laws, and because it is the systematic organization of a specific field of knowledge, and has its own scope, method, and categories. The paper claims that the Federation should maintain over all its professional status.

Introduction

This paper is based on qualitative questions according to the guide attached to the call for papers of the Section of Library Theory and Research for the IFLA Conference 2006 at Seoul, Korea. The contents of the report are identified by the number of the questions in the guide and by an abridged title of the main topic of each question. A copy of the complete guide is included at the end of the report. It is important to notice how in several items not only the norms and standards received through IFLA are informed, but also the material support granted by the Federation in order to apply such recommendations are described. This is an important feature of IFLA's aid to developing countries through ALP and other bodies. It should be considered as part of the Federation's role in diffusing norms and standards.

The report is just partial because not all contacted colleagues offered information. Nevertheless, answers to **questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 (library organizations, position, attendance to IFLA, membership and position in IFLA's bodies)** show that respondents included have important backgrounds in practical librarianship, with experience in different kinds of libraries and library schools. They have attended several IFLA conferences, and have or have had a position in governing bodies responsible for national library policies. Most of them have also a background from library associations, and some represent library education and research.

5 What has been gained from taking part in IFLA activities

One of IFLA's first contributions to the Cuban library movement was the example of its professional organization. Today the Cuban Association of Librarians (ASCUBI) is organized by sections that reproduce to some extent those of IFLA, even though not all possible sections have been created already, and some of IFLA's sections are not suitable to Cuban realities.

IFLA gives the opportunity to meet personally a great number of specialists from different countries, and to exchange experiences with them. In IFLA conferences we got acquainted with the ISBD standards and brought them to be adapted afterwards as Cuban standards.

Contacted colleagues, that work as professors in different library schools, inform that they have transmitted to their pupils so many of the experiences observed during IFLA's conferences that they could not detail all of them during the interviews. Anyway students have received a thorough explanation of IFLA's possibilities.

During Cuban attendance to IFLA conferences important relations were established with the Section of Libraries for the Blind and ALP. As a result of those relations our country organized IFLA's Latinamerican Seminar of Library Services For The Blind in 1993. The Seminar propitiated contacts among specialized librarians of the region in services for the blind, and brought other benefits to the country. For example, members of the Section gave us the equipment to establish a laboratory to produce talking books, and a specialist from the UK came to Cuba to teach several of our colleagues how to use the equipment and how to organize the production of these books. The books produced in this laboratory have been distributed among the special reading rooms for the blind of the public libraries and other libraries serving these special readers. At that time we also

received important quantities of paper for the braille book production in several Cuban prints.

Through ALP came the first computers used in our public libraries and several grants to attend IFLA's Pre and Post Conference Seminars.

With the cooperation of IFLA we established contacts with many sponsors for different professional activities and one of IFLA's officers offered a Seminar on the organization of library associations for Cuban colleagues.

Attendance to the conferences contributed to get acquainted with new information about recent trends in the international library loans and concepts of the universal bibliographic control.

During the 60th Conference (1994), that took place in our country, more than 400 Cuban librarians had the opportunity to meet about 800 colleagues from abroad, to inform them about our professional development and to know about their experiences. Since then several Cuban librarians became corresponding members of different IFLA sections and maintain frequent contacts with them, specially those related to ASCUBI'S groups of Libraries for Children and Young Adults, Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons, Bibliography, Rare Books and Manuscripts, School Libraries. Through these contacts several professional recommendations to improve library services had been received. Relations with the Section of School Libraries of IFLA began during the Pre Seminar held at Barcelona's Conference, in 1993. Since then we have a regular exchange of experiences with colleagues of Argentine and Spain about school libraries organization, reading promotion, and recent bibliography related to those libraries. Some of those colleagues had papers published in the Bulletin of the Cuban School Libraries.

Recently we held in Cuba an IFLA regional activity devoted to analyze the use of INTERNET in Caribbean Libraries.

6 About considerable resources spent on the yearly IFLA conferences

Attendance to IFLA's conferences is, maybe, one of the best forms to gain professional experiences through personal exchange with other colleagues. Unfortunately such attendance is extremely expensive for librarians from developing countries who generally depend on sponsorships received from different organizations. It is true that considerable resources are spent on the yearly conferences, but it does not seem that they will be enough for other social activities, as literacy projects mentioned in the interview guide, for example. Those projects must be undertaken by governmental authorities in different countries and not only by librarians. In Cuba, for example, public libraries had an important role in the literacy campaign for the blind, but the general literacy campaign of the 60 was a mass movement organized and financed by the Revolutionary Government. Perhaps part of the above mentioned resources could be used to sponsor the attendance of more librarians from developing countries, as ALP and other entities meritorious efforts for such purposes are not enough.

7. About IFLA's role as a source of professional inspiration

For those who can have a systematic access to IFLA's conferences, seminars and publications, the Federation is undoubtedly an important source of professional inspiration

8. About benefits that can be traced back to IFLA during the last decade

During the last decade Cuban attendance to IFLA conferences has been poor in the number of participants, except attendance to the one that took place in Argentina in 2004, where several of Cuban librarians were present. For many of them it was the first participation in an IFLA conference. This was a handicap as the conferences with all its simultaneous meetings are difficult for newcomers in order to gain many new experiences. Nevertheless, we could become members of a new group of Iberoamerican Library Associations created during the conference. During the last 10 years we also received from IFLA's bodies donations for the Reading Room for the Blind at the National Library José Martí.

But not all were professional benefits during these last years. We have had to face during recent conferences and between them an incredible attack to our country's political and social organization under the umbrella of "Freedom to information access" in Cuban libraries. This campaign has been organized mainly by payed agents of the US Government, claiming for what they call "independent" libraries, and followed by some IFLA officers and colleagues from other countries undoubtedly mixed up with such propaganda, if not with adverse political and not professional intentions. The Cuban Association of Librarians has denounced repeatedly those attacks, as we hope IFLA to remain a professional body, and not to become a political one.

9. About information literacy

If we accept ODLIS definition of information literacy, we are in face of a concept that is not new for Cuban librarians as we are used to practice such an activity since the 60s of last century, at least. Teaching readers on skills for finding needed information, which requires knowledge of how libraries are organized, familiarity with the resources they provide (including recent information formats and computerized search tools), and knowledge of standard research techniques, has been practiced for years in our libraries through activities of readers education, explaining how to use the institution and its resources. With the apparition of documentation centres the indefinite expression of "users education" began to be employed (users of what?), and finally, with automation's influence and the recognition of information as an important development resource, the expression "information literacy" has been introduced. Several respondents to our interviews think that IFLA should adopt the original expression of "readers education" including in its definition the reading promotion, as the contribution of libraries to continuing education of every type of reader.

10. About the dimensions of this complex concept

Information literacy is a complex concept **mainly because the information concept is complex**. Different sources offer countless definitions about information. Among them the one with a more general scope is the one that considers information as the "*contents of the relation between two entities that produces a change in their status*". This

definition may include the processes that take place in the sinapsis, as well as those that happen in the electric circuits. Brook's fundamental equation of Information Science may be also explained by this definition as it establishes that the exchange of human information modifies knowledge structures. In those terms the equation is also useful to several disciplines related to knowledge development such as Psychology and Pedagogy, for example. Then: How must be considered IFLA's performance within such dimensions of the information concept in general and of information literacy specifically? This difficulty is also present in the definitions of Library and Information Science. LIS needs to explain clearly what are the limits to be considered within its scope as a discipline. In the complexity of today's scientific problems each discipline must establish its frontiers so it may be known which would be its contribution to the solution of those problems. To assume today the theory of complexity with effectiveness the attitude should be to identify the disciplines' frontiers, as well as their channels of communication, and not to erase those frontiers.

11 Obstacles to information literacy

In Cuba the lack of reading and writing capability was eradicated more than 40 years ago and the education standards are high. Libraries practice readers education with their available resources as explained in 9.

12 About the role of IFLA in the conflicts of information policy

Of course IFLA should take a stand in these conflicts, always with an altruist position, patronizing solutions that do not restrain the open access of libraries to all kind of information because of narrow-minded economical considerations, as it often happens in market economies, or even because of mean political positions as those suffered by Cuban libraries under the U.S.A. blockade. The effects of this blockade in Cuban libraries and in our information literacy campaigns may be appreciated in *Bloqueo y bibliotecas* http://www.bnjm.cu/bnjm/espanol/index_e.asp

13 About the role of IFLA in the information literacy

IFLA may contribute to the precision of "information literacy" distinguishing the specific library meaning of this concept, including the reading promotion in its scope as it was already explained in former paragraphs, and using in its definition the vocabulary that corresponds to Library Science, as a specific discipline. Such definition should be promoted through all IFLA's bodies.

14 Other topics

From what has been expressed in former topics it may be deduced that some of our respondents are not convinced of the LIS conception that has been extended through IFLA during the last years, mainly after FID's dissolution. They consider that if Information Science has been developing as a new discipline during the last 50 years, as it seems to be (or maybe several disciplines), it is not necessary to unify it with Library Science. Library Science as a discipline covering a particular field of knowledge is recognized since the beginning of the 19th. Century and, has gained a place among social sciences during the 20th. because it studies the library phenomenon as a whole, in its relations with social conditions. This observation does not pretend to ignore the

necessary interdisciplinary relations between Library Science and Information Science or Information Sciences, as well as its relations with other fields of knowledge that had originated specialties within Library Science such as Library Sociology or Library Psychology, for example.

Finally IFLA's material and economical aid for the adoption of norms and standards should be considered as part of the diffusion of such recommendations. The Federation should take a stand in the conflicts of information policy that damage libraries and its readers. Should work to strengthen and develop Library Science as an independent discipline because it studies a social phenomenon that has its own particular laws. As a discipline LS is a systematic organization of a specific field of knowledge, and has its own scope, method, and categories. The Federation should maintain over all its professional status.

I. Qualitative interviews – interview guide.

1. Background information on the respondents and his/her relationship to and experiences with IFLA

2. First we would like you to say some words about your background: What is your present position?

- What kind of library or library-related institution do you work in?
- What is your main responsibility in this institution?

3. Are you an experienced IFLA participant or would you describe yourself as a novice – I

mean: How many conferences have you participated at?

4. Are you a member or an officer of any body in IFLA, i.e. a standing committee, roundtable,

division etc? If yes: What kind of position do you have in which body?

5. What would you say that you personally gain as a library and information professional from taking part in the IFLA activities? Try to be as concrete and specific as possible.

Can you, for example, point at professional ideas, standards, methods etc. which have been important in your professional life and where IFLA-activities have played a role as a

source of inspiration?

The general effects of IFLA in spreading in spreading professional norms and standards and in developing librarianship.

6. Every year 3-4000 library and information professionals meet at the IFLA-conferences.

Considerable resources are spent which, alternatively, could have been used for other purposes, for example concrete literacy projects etc. If someone maintains that the millions of dollars spent on the yearly IFLA-conferences better could be used alternatively, how would you meet such an argument? What, if anything, does the library

community in general and the library community in your country in particular according to your opinion gain from IFLA and IFLA-activities that can defend the resources spent?

7. As professionals we get professional impulses from a variety of sources, e.g. research in

LIS, national and international networks of which we are members, professional journals,

others but related professional and academic field, seminars, further educational courses,

exemplary and innovative libraries nationally and abroad, national governing bodies and policy organs etc. IFLA is one possible source of professional inspiration.

- How do you, generally, evaluate, IFLA as a source of professional impulses and inspiration compared to other sources? Is IFLA an important source of professional impulses compared to the other mentioned or a relatively marginal one?

- Could you reflect a bit on what kind of impulses IFLA is particularly capable of diffusing, e.g. concrete ideas concerning service production, the role and purpose of librarianship, methods and techniques in management, new professional trends such as Knowledge Management, standards in classification and cataloguing etc.

8. Can you identify new ideas, services, methods, techniques etc. that have been implemented in your country over the last decade that can be traced back to IFLA or

where IFLA has played a significant role in diffusing the innovation or idea in question?

If

yes, specify the kind of innovation(s) or idea(s) and the role that you think can be ascribed to IFLA..

IFLA and (information) literacy

9. Information literacy is a complex concept. We would like you to elaborate what you believe to be the most important dimensions of this concept.

10. Which dimensions of this complex concept do you think IFLA should give priority in the organisation's work to promote lifelong literacy? Are there specific dimensions of this

problem-area which you regard IFLA as particularly capable of working with and where,

accordingly, IFLA can be an efficient instrument?

11. Obstacles to information literacy are many. They consist, among other things of literacy in the narrow sense, i.e. the lack of reading and writing capability, lack of access to

technology – ICT or printed material, lack of ability to understand a message, lack of access to relevant and understandable content, lack of the ability to identify, select and evaluate information, lack of access to a supportive and stimulating environment etc. ---

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_ Which are, according to your opinion, the most important hindrances to life long literacy

in your country?

_ Which role could IFLA play in overcoming those barriers and hindrances?

12. Many issues in information policy are conflict ridden. Groups representing different interests or values oppose each other. The issue of copyright versus open access is one example. Free borrowing versus fee is another. What about the issue of literacy? Is that also conflict ridden, or is it an issue where all parties can agree and join forces for the sake of a common good? If you see conflicts, please specify what kind of interests and values which according to your opinion are standing against each other.

Should IFLA take a stand in these conflicts, or should IFLA focus upon those parts of the

issue that are not conflict ridden or try to be as neutral as possible?

13. Many institutions and organisations, international as well as regional and national, are

working in order to promote information literacy, for example. How do you evaluate the role of IFLA?

- Is the role of IFLA a major one or a more marginal one compared to other organisations and institutions?

- Does IFLA have a specific role to play that would not have been covered properly had not IFLA been there, or is the role of IFLA to add strength to a common choir without having a specific role to play which is different from other participants. If you believe IFLA has a specific role to play, we would like you to elaborate a little on that.

14. Are there any other questions or topics concerning IFLA and information literacy that

you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your cooperation.