

# Libraries and librarians in the 21st century<sup>1</sup>

## Fostering a learning society

by Robert S. Martin

*Ed. note:* To keep in step with the evolution of ideas emerging from her year as ACRL President, Frances Maloy has redefined the focus of her presidential theme to emphasize the importance of creativity and leadership in academic and research libraries. To that end, the series of articles focusing on her theme has been changed from Libraries Are Education to Creativity and Leadership.

Libraries are social agencies. They exist to serve specific needs in our society. Changes in the environment in which libraries operate—in the technological infrastructure through which we deliver services, in the economic substrate that finances operations, in the social landscape that defines the communities that libraries serve—dictate corresponding changes in the way libraries structure and deliver services. One additional change in our environment—our emerging understanding of the nature of learning and the way learning interacts with other aspects of our environment—is likely to result in an even more rapid change in the coming decade.

I am convinced that museums and libraries are fundamentally social agencies that share the role of providing the resources and

services that stimulate and support learning throughout a lifetime. That simple recognition underlies the Congressional action that created the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in its present form less than a decade ago. And that is why at IMLS we are dedicated to the purpose of creating and sustaining a nation of learners.

### **We must become a learning society**

We often hear it said today that we are living in an information age. But in a world drowning in information, we are hungry for knowledge. That is why today, in the 21st century, we must be more than an information society. We must become a learning society.

Building a learning society requires that we do more than develop the hardware, software, telecommunications networks, and other services and systems that supply and organize content. It requires additional structure and context to enable learners around the globe to put knowledge to good use.

What we know about learning—where, when, and how it happens—is changing. Over the past 20 years, there has been an explosion of neuroscientific research. We now know more than ever about how the human

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### About the author

Robert S. Martin is director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services in Washington, D.C., e-mail: [rmartin@imls.gov](mailto:rmartin@imls.gov)

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brain learns, from infancy throughout the senior years. We know that, although there are intense periods of rapid brain development in early childhood, our brains continue to develop and form new connections throughout our entire lives. We know that children are never too young to learn, and we know that lifelong learning extends the quantity and quality of life.

The structures we have in place today for providing public education evolved in response to specific environmental conditions and social needs. Our current structures for learning—the formal education system embodying both the K-12 school system and the post-secondary education system—are relatively late developments in the evolution of human society. It has only been within the last 100 years or so that the words *learning*, *education*, and *schooling* came to be treated as synonyms.<sup>2</sup>

It is only within the last century that we have come to believe that the best way—indeed, virtually the only way—for people to learn is in structured, formalized education systems. But, in fact, in our society we learn in three different sectors. We learn in the school. We learn in the workplace. And we learn in the home and community. The last of these three sectors is now frequently referred to as the free-choice learning sector, underscoring that learners in this environment are motivated by individual needs and interests.

These changes are clearly summarized by the recently published *2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition*, which notes that we now operate in a knowledge economy . . . in which technology and the knowledge on which it is based are central motors of economic growth. This means that human or intellectual capital—the knowledge that comes from education, training, on-the-job experience and workplace-based e-learning—is central to sustaining personal and organizational advantage. This has important implications, among which is that the ability to learn and to adapt to change is a central life skill. Learning is valued as a crucial coping skill in an environment of change and flexibility.<sup>3</sup>

The *OCLC Environmental Scan* also brings to our attention three major social trends: self-service, moving to self-sufficiency; satisfaction; and seamlessness. Of these, the last is most relevant to envisioning a new role for libraries in the 21st century. While self-sufficiency and satisfaction are important to learning and to structuring library services that support learning, the importance of seamlessness is crucial, and possibly the dominant trend for the future of libraries. According to the OCLC report, in today's society: The traditional separation of academic, leisure and work time is fusing into a seamless world aided and supported by nomadic computing and information appliances that support multiple activities.

The report goes on to stress that this is particularly significant among young adults, noting that: . . . the freshman class of 2003 grew up with computers, multimedia, the Internet and a wired world. . . . Their world is a seamless infosphere where the boundaries between work, play and study are gone. Computers are not technology, and multitasking is a way of life. . . . the lines between workplace and home are blurred.

While the report uses this analysis as a foundation to describe the kinds of seamless services that libraries need to develop, I think it is important to recognize the implications that go beyond our institutional boxes, and to contemplate developing a seamless infrastructure for learning across all the social agencies and organizations that create, maintain, and provide access to resources that support learning. In short, we need to adopt a bold new vision of learning.

### **Learning is a community-wide responsibility**

The responsibility for learning is not and should not be the exclusive preserve of formal educational institutions. It is a community-wide responsibility. Lifelong learning should be a continuum with formal and nonformal learning opportunities complementing one another. Learning does not start at the schoolroom door, and it does not stop there either. It is and should be ubiquitous.

Addressing the needs of the free-choice learning sector is now more critical than ever. As more people become self-guided learners throughout their lifetimes, institutions such as libraries, museums, and public broadcasters, among others, can help to stimulate and meet their demands.

In fact, we foresee a pending convergence of museums, libraries, archives, and other agencies of cultural and educational content, along with perhaps unexpected partners in the environment, such as broadcasters. The impact of digital technology, which has fostered the rapid development of rich collections accessible via the Internet, has revealed the synergistic way these agencies can collaborate.

Equally important is the remarkable way that users find material relevant to their own unique needs and interests and retrieve and combine this content in unanticipated ways. It is important to note that the users of these digital collections do not care, and may well not even be aware, that the originals of the digital surrogates that they use are in a museum, a library, an archive, or some other kind of institution. They really do not care how you define your institution—they just want access to the stuff.

This convergence is not restricted to the digital environment. Networked digital information technology has simply lifted the veil that has obscured the basic fact that the silos into which libraries, museums, archives, broadcasters, and other developers and purveyors of learning resources and opportunities have been relegated are ghettos of our own making. There is no natural law that distinguishes library from museum, museum from archives.

On the contrary, the natural state of affairs—underscored by our common history—is that the similarities among such agencies are far more striking than the differences. The distinctions have only arisen in the recent evolution of human history, in response to specific technological practices that separated object from text and manuscript from printed codex.

If we can posit that librarians, archivists, and museum professionals are not separate

and distinct professions, but rather different facets of a single unified profession, we will find that our ability to serve the needs of our communities is strengthened. If we re-envision ourselves as public servants, charged with the responsibility for collecting and organizing the materials that document our rich and diverse cultural heritage and enhancing access to those materials for our citizens, we will find that we can reshape our practices, learn from each other, and better attend to our users.

### **Looking ahead**

As we move forward in this 21st century, we need to change our thinking about how to develop and structure library services. We need to evolve into agencies that focus not on collections, but on the needs of the users. We need to develop facilities that recognize, embrace, and encourage the collaborative and social nature of learning. We must create learning environments that empower student learning, enabling them to turn information into knowledge. We must extend these lessons from the realm of the university to all levels of formal education, from kindergarten to the research university.

Beyond this, however, we must also embrace the same principles for libraries of every kind, including the public library. We must recognize and embrace the social nature of continuous learning, free-choice learning that lasts a lifetime. Public libraries must be conceived as a learning environment, providing spaces that foster and support the individual learner, as well as learners in every imaginable form of social grouping.

But we also need to think much more broadly, to envision a seamless learning infrastructure, one that stimulates and supports learning for learners of all ages, in all circumstances. If we are truly to empower individuals to fulfillment—to enable them to maximize their human potential, become contributing members of the knowledge economy, and to participate effectively in civic affairs—then we must build a fabric of social agencies that facilitates continuous lifelong learning. Such a fabric must integrate all of our current social

agencies that create, manage, and provide access to learning resources, including schools, libraries, museums, archives, broadcasters, and a host of other organizations and agencies.

In the 21st century environment of rapid change, fostering an individual ethic and ability to learn throughout a lifetime is increasingly important, to maximize individual potential and social growth and stability. Schools alone are not enough. Of course we continue to need schools, colleges, and universities—we need the very best agencies of formal education that we can create. And libraries have always played an integral part in supporting curriculum and instruction in these agencies of formal education. Research demonstrates that the better supported and better integrated school and academic libraries are in the fabric of the institution, the better the parent institutions are able to achieve their goals.

But we need to go beyond our now-traditional notions of education and embrace a bold new vision of learning. We need to think beyond our institutional boxes and develop a seamless infrastructure for learning across all

the social agencies and organizations that create, maintain, and provide access to resources that support learning.

Libraries—as well as museums, archives, and other cultural agencies—are important elements in this Web of learning. In fact, given our history of collaboration and our tradition of service, we can lead the way in demonstrating the potential and developing the reality. Our communities will demand it. If we do not provide it, someone else will.

### Notes

1. This article is an abridged version of a longer essay that will appear in the 2004 volume of *Advances in Librarianship*.

2. J. H. Falk, and L. D. Dierking, *Lessons without Limit: How Free-Choice Learning is Transforming Education*. (New York: Altamira Press, 2002).

3. C. De Rosa, L. Dempsey, and A. Willson, *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Inc., 2004). ■