Librarians as Knowledge Producers

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I'd like to begin by thanking Helen and the committee of the ANLTC for inviting me back to speak with you this morning. If your drive to develop a research culture in Irish librarianship had been around when I was a practicing librarian, I would like to think that I'd still be one. But although I'm a lapsed, non-practicing librarian I strongly champion the work that you have been doing to enhance the research capabilities of the various library sectors in Ireland, particularly as it is about developing the idea of the *librarian* as researcher.

When Helen asked me to do this some months ago, we agreed on the title of 'librarian as knowledge producer' for my talk. This is a very interesting approach because it is anchored around the belief that is still held that librarianship is a _passive_ profession. When I was librarian in the IT formerly known as the Institute of Technology Tallaght I was incensed by an article that appeared in *American Libraries* that suggested that the librarian character in the teen-horror-comedy show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was somehow 'cool' because he wasn't like <u>normal</u> librarians. If you'll indulge me for a second I want to quote from an opinion piece that I wrote in response to this in the same journal.

> 'Giles stocks his collection with occult works that are irrelevant to the wider student population he is supposed to serve. He is a Luddite working in a field that that is reliant on information technology. He is self-absorbed and unhelpful - at the beginning of one of episode he sits reading a book while Buffy fights demons and vampires only feet away. He has no concept of reader service and is always surprised when students enter the library to do real research. If Giles actually spent one day fighting the battles that real librarians face, all the bloodcurdling demons in hell wouldn't faze him' (May 2000: 42).

I might have over-stated the last point, but despite the hyperbole it is interesting how some things change, and some stay the same. Despite the fact that librarianship involves dealing with finance, implementing and developing cutting edge IT, designing and managing physical learning spaces, delivery knowledge in increasing varieties of genres, repository management, and regardless of the fact that we are a graduate profession, librarians still too often seen as *passive* curators of knowledge, rather than producers, or *partners* in the production of knowledge.

You are all here today because you are research-interested or research active, so I know that you share my convictions. My passion for research has taken me away from my profession: librarianship and I'm often very sorry that it has. New opportunities, new environments and fora like this means that this does not have to happen to you. Groups like ANLTC have started the ball rolling in a direction that could lead to fundamental change in the profession. It's very much up to you, and people like you, to keep this going. I want to talk a little bit about my own story so you might use it as a resource going forward.

Think about practical, knowledge-intensive professions such as medicine, law, business and librarianship. There is always a need to connect education and training in tandem with both research and practice. The professor of respiratory medicine is a good teacher because her research makes her a member of a community of knowledge. In order to make contributions to her research community she must ensure that she keeps up-to-date on contemporary theory and practice which in turn benefits her students. Finally, she keeps rooms to ensure that her research has real world applications that can benefit her patients. Her research, teaching and clinical practice interlink in ways that are essential. Similarly the professor of corporate law researches, teaches and *practices* law to make sure that the legal professionals they train do not end up absorbing theory that is solely theoretical and cannot benefit their clients. Management academics are expected to consult with real business organisations to ensure that their theories do not exist in the abstract. Indeed, many high-profile critiques from *within* the management academy warned *prior the global financial crisis* that when businesses and societies are managed on abstract economic theories, rather than taking more social or sustainable approaches, that chaos would ensue. In this case the failure to link teaching and research to practice had widespread pathological effects.

Do the links between research and practice in librarianship exist? More importantly, does research reflect the needs of practitioners, particularly those who will apply it? My 'origin story' as a researcher arose from a pretty selfish, practical need. I was working for an organisation and noticed during a break one Friday morning, that a newly recruited senior manager was openly reading the recruitment section of the *Irish Times*. This struck me as a little odd, as I imagined it would give a poor impression after joining a new organisation. I asked her about it, and she told me that she always kept an eye on the appointment sections to get a sense of the new skills required of managers in a variety of different areas. I've worked as a leadership lecturer in NUI Maynooth for the past six years and I think that most people will work for two *real* leaders during their working life: people who help them develop beyond their own potential. I can't mention who this particular manager is, because Ireland is really small, but I think that anyone who has worked for this particular individual would agree with me that she really fits this profile. I only worked with her for a very short period of time in fact, but her impact on how I think about work, and about being a *productive* professional has remained with me.

At the time when I worked for her, Ireland had just begun to wake up economically so there was still a lot of value placed on finding and keep a job from the some very dark years just a

few years previously. There was a discourse that existed around how to make yourself employable and how to convince people in interviews about how to change yourself so you could convince recruiters that you were the person for the job. Nobody had actually systematically reviewed what the recruitment market wanted in order to undertake evidence-based career decisions. I decided to get hold of the, then, two most comprehensive weekly recruitment sections and mine them for information about sectors where most positions were available and the skills and capabilities required for employment. During the course of doing this I remember reading an interview with a librarian about their work in the public library sector. The interviewee made a remark about academic libraries also being a source of employment, but the journalist then discussed this as if it was factual, and that public libraries were where the job opportunities were. This was the opposite of what my data was saying. I began to reflect that many people made career choices on the basis of such misrepresentations.

When I had completed my analysis I had a picture of what salaries were available, what type of qualifications and skills were needed and a friend told me that it would be of use to other people in the same boat as myself. If blogging was on my radar about 15 years ago I'd probably have done something with it then, but instead I submitted it as brief communication to the *Journal of Information Science*. I've never since experienced the sense of professional satisfaction that I had when they accepted it for publication. I was hooked on research from then. My point is that the problems and questions you experience as professionals **regardless** of your age or progress in a professional setting are the *raw material* for your research agenda. If you were to sit down and read a book about becoming a researcher for the first time today, you'd probably get the sense of a very high inaccessible mountain, signposted with unhelpful jargon. You'd get the feeling that this mountain was going to be too much work, and really wasn't for you.

My research career began with an *everyday concern* that I undertook, in my own time, at my own pace. It was a very straightforward piece of data collection. I treated it like an amusing errand. It didn't change the world, but I still get emails about it today. It aligned with what I was interested in and unintentionally contributed something.

So, if there are two words that I'd like to you to take from this presentation that assists you in your transition to becoming a research-active, knowledge producing library professional they are:

- **Align**, and
- **Contribute**.

The rationale behind adopting these keywords is very straightforward.

Align really means make it is easy for yourself. Researching a subject that you are deeply interested in, but will not practically benefit you at work means that you are preparing for

another career, and will affect the quality of your professional work. If you then do not complete, you will be in a worse position than when you started out. Additionally you might fall out of love and resent your 'pet' interest.

Contribute means that you have to get rid of the belief that research is something that you must be innately exceptional at doing; instead remember that research involves producing knowledge *not for its own* sake but because it will potentially be of use and benefit for somebody: for people who are in the same professional or personal situation as you; for your organisation; for the world!

Starting from there, let's think about the reasons why librarians should devote more time to thinking of themselves as knowledge producers.

1. *Caché:* Having your research accepted and published in a peer-reviewed academic journal makes you a bona-fidé researcher, and full-time academics respect this. Just have a look at lecturing job descriptions and see how research activity that is published in reviewed journals is prioritised over other forms of outputs. That is not to say that PhD's aren't important. In fact I wish more librarians would engage in the process of getting one!
2. *Enhanced professional capability*: Organisations of all types struggle to develop the deepest possible understanding of their routines, processes, outputs and culture. Employees who not only do the work of the organisation, but are also interested in it at a theoretical level and actively research it in various ways with a view to finding significant nuances are a key and irreplaceable contribution to its talent pool.
3. *Strategic*:   In today's highly competitive and evolving educational landscape it is crucial that everyone in higher education, regardless of what type of organisation you work for, is a knowledge producer. This means: more doctorates, and more peer-reviewed research papers needing to be published by everyone attached to the university. We need to get the message across that teaching and service are vital, but our national reputation as a higher education leader is dependent on the creation of research-intensive, knowledge-producing work cultures. This means that research cannot be limited to the professional researchers and academics, but has to be part of what people *do* in their daily working lives. It goes without saying that success in these areas should be incentivised, rewarded and celebrated.
4. *Collaborative:* One of the big things that strikes me about academic life is that it often becomes *all* your life. Every day begins and ends with thoughts about work and research. That might sound unappealing; it is for many people simply an honest statement. I imagine, however, that the time-greedy nature of our research-led lives apply to most jobs now. Although many universities provide excellent research *support*, we also need research *partners* who will work with us to share data collection, literature reviews, analysis, publication preparation and grant writing. Let me be very clear about this point – WE DO NOT WANT LIBRARIANS TO BECOME OUR

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS. I would never ask anyone to be involved in a project if they weren't to receive half the funding; I would never ask anyone to write a research paper if they were not to receive full and equal billing with me as a co-author. NEVER ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN TO YOU. This year I began collecting recruitment data on Irish and UK librarians in an attempt to gauge the extent to which the current trend for big data and analytics was influencing change in the profession. It took a couple of hours work per week, but administrative pressures meant that I couldn't keep up. A 'running partner' from a library could have done one hour and I could have done another. I have a longstanding need to interview librarians about gender capital as a resource in information service. I need a voice from within the profession. If either of these strike you as interesting projects, please see me at lunch. If you have other projects that you are tentatively interested in and are looking for a partner, please ask me and I'll advise in whatever way I can. This could be a ground-up exploratory project with no initial funding; or you might be interested in doing a PhD part-time like I did. Academics need intelligent partners; librarians need academic researchers. Collaborative conversations should be a 'no-brainer'.

To return to my comment earlier about research becoming your life, I realise that this might be extremely off-putting for many, but I was really talking about research as an extreme position where at times it can become all-encompassing. However, it highlights the fact that there is a need to examine reasons why librarians **should not** become knowledge producers and researchers. Here's the main 7 reasons from my experience given by librarians for why they shouldn't become research active.

1. It's not what we do
2. We don't have the time/energy
3. We're not resourced to do it
4. We're not rewarded for doing it
5. It changes you
6. It's too hard
7. We're not capable of doing it.

Every single one of these are valid. Think back to the last time when you had a gruelling, de-motivating day at work. Remember the exhaustion. Now imagine someone telling you that your efforts were still not good enough because you don't research also. We've all been in a place like this, so please don't think that I'm dictating what you *should* do. Rather, I want to offer productive advice to people who *want* to do this. I want to frame my responses to each of these questions using the 'keywords' I identified earlier.

1. *It's not what we do*
   The spaces that librarianship have occupied in the past have a tendency to be appropriated by corporate practices. One of the most influential professors of

business information services and systems, Tom Davenport has often played tribute to the way that libraries and information services have underpinned much of his work. Knowledge management in the early 1990s was an early example. More recently data analytics has become of massive interest to the corporate world and both business and the Irish government have invested heavily in these areas. Some of my initial findings about occupational change in the LIS profession noted a change in the very nature of the 'emerging' information market. In the late 1990s this work was in the area of knowledge management; now there is a noted 'analytical' element entering many new job positions in the academic and corporate library sectors.

Seeking a <u>contribution</u> involves looking at what it is that you really do and deepening it. Although librarianship has been about many things over the ages, and many of these have changed, the one constant has been that of *service.* What better service can you provide than actually collaborating with a willing research partner?

2. *We don't have the time/energy*
   Again, as far as is possible, make your project or your PhD part of your daily work. Make the data you handle (whether it be IT applications, quantitative software, budgets, management decisions, etc) data for your project. There is an every expanding range of methodologies for doing this – autoethnography and action research are two that I've used. It perhaps go without saying that your work will become more mindful.

   Success and recognition have a way of generating energy of their own. When your work begins to get funded, published or recognised you <u>will</u> experience new levels of personal professional satisfaction that you didn't experience in the past. And you will get this satisfaction because of the intrinsic nature of knowledge production, but also because you will have made an impact on somebody else.

3. *We're not resourced to do it*
   This is part of being a trailblazer in a profession. When I first started working in NUI Maynooth I attended a research seminar in my doctoral alma mater in the UK. It struck me how incredibly well-resourced my counterparts were across in the Irish Sea in terms of research funding for a number of projects. I received some initial funding for research activities following my initial foray into Irish recruitment data from the Library & Information Research Group in the UK. There are pots of money in various places that your academic research collaborators will know about.

Part for contributing also involves contributing to the work of your library employer. If you research interests align with what your manager is interested in pursuing, there will doubtlessly be funding opportunities to suggest down the line.

4. *We're not rewarded for doing it*
   Interestingly enough, this has become the least-used reason from people when stating a rationale for not doing research. I think a large element of this stems from the fact that doing research is very often its own reward. However, when you consider that being research-active is core to being recruited and promoted as an academic, and maybe not aways as a librarian, attention needs to be given to the question of incentives. This, it appears to me, may be a campaign issue for library groups. It's been well over a decade since I interviewed for a library post but I distinctly remember all panel members stating admiration for my research work. The rewards may not be explicitly stated, but this does not mean that they are not there.

5. *It changes you*
   This is true. I never really know how to respond to this. Kurt Lewin said 'if you really want to understand something, try to change it'.   Perhaps one of the first ways around this is to begin participating as research participants in readily available projects.

   Becoming a researcher as well as a librarian is significant 'identity work': it changes who you are and what you believe your big contributions in life will be. When I first began looking a job adverts closely in 1999 I didn't intend becoming a business academic. I realised that the process of sending articles for review was part of the process and things changed for me from there.

6. *It's too hard*
   Despite the fading perception that some people have about librarianship being low-risk and slow –feedback, it's actually a very fast business. You know immediately if your service user is happy or not. In fact, in well run libraries you never get much positive affirmation because your users quickly accommodate your high standards and don't recognise them.

   Research frustrates librarians because it is often a very slow process. Be patient. It's hard, but you have to constantly remind yourself that it will be worth it, and the knowledge you produce will be of value to somebody at the end.

7. *We're not capable of doing it.*
   Everybody feels this way about research at the start. You feel it more if you've been lucky enough not to know enough about the world to doubt your capabilities. But some forms of research such as the PhD, rely on doubt at the outset. The lack of certainty contributes to identifying and enhancing a good question. Isn't it interesting though, that librarians sometimes doubt their capabilities to do research when they are already members of a graduate profession? Not only that but librarians are probably one of the most diverse graduate professions in the world.

   This is why it is very important to get a good network around yourself at the very outset. Confidence is socially constructed. Seminars like this and groups like ANLTC generate this confidence, which is why I thank Helen and the organisers for the honour of inviting me here today. You will go back to your jobs after today and experience the loneliness of the long-distance runner getting that PhD proposal together, planning that article, collecting that data, but you've already got the bones of a support group here in this room: your running-partners who will push you when you need it and encourage you to go faster when you want to. Align with the people in this room, and more importantly contribute to their efforts when you can.

   I want to highlight the responsibility that you have to each other here today to get each other started as knowledge producers. When you get to chat, some will say that they are here for various reasons, but really you're here because you want to research. Your managers, your colleagues, your collaborators and supervisors will all play a role. But think of your role as a running partner for the people in this room, right now. Align, contribute: start now.