



Linking theory and practice in LIS education in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Abstract:

It seems to be obvious that there must be a close relationship between theory and practice in LIS education, but this link is often overlooked, prioritizing any of these approaches, leaving aside that theoretical formulations arise from practice and practice is based on theoretical formulations. The road that goes from concepts and ideas to actions and from actions to concepts and ideas is a two-way street. Refer to a LIS theory is to talk about a set of concepts and ideas inherently related to phenomena from our discipline. On the other hand, LIS practice is the concretion and manifestation of a set of actions related to those concepts and ideas in certain time and place. LIS theory is a way of conceiving our discipline, while LIS practice is the way of becoming it something concrete and a way to apply it. Notwithstanding the existence of this close link between LIS theory and practice, sometimes it can be noticed that LIS education is essentially based in practice, arguing the existence of an inadequate theory, or that it is unrealistic to common library issues. Conversely, it also can be observed that sometimes LIS education is totally theoretical, disconnected from the practice, apart from the learning about how concepts can be put into action, and students are not able of giving meaning and value to their learning. As in other parts of the world, this dichotomy in LIS education, also occurs in Latin America and the Caribbean countries, so the aim of this presentation is to analyze the link between theory and practice in LIS education in this region as well as outlining a set of recommendations to strengthen their ties and look for a balance.

LIS education based on practice

The debate between "theory" and "practice", and on the importance of each one to guide librarian formation, has been present for many decades. Danton, in a paper published in 1950, summarized the trends that had previously oriented training of librarians until that date, and that also have been inherent in the methods of teaching LIS today. The two trends presented as opposites are in one hand the "practical" approach, and in the other one the "theoretical" approach. Danton explains these trends as follows:

Those who support the << practical >> point of view claim that LIS does not have a general body of knowledge, and that the future librarian can only learn through experience, either in a library, or in reference or cataloging classes at laboratories. Those who support the theoretical point of view, [...] argue that there is a general body of knowledge that constitutes LIS, and that the future librarian will be better prepared for professional practice by understanding the theories and principles underlying subjects such as management, book selection, and classification, being able to apply them to specific situations.

Undoubtedly, the discussion on a practical or theoretical LIS education has not been overcome in our days, which can be confirmed in the professional literature. It is also notable that despite the criticisms made on "practice" in librarian training, this has been imposed for decades. In the discussion that for a long time has taken place between the "theory" and "practice" issue in LIS education, as well as about importance of the first one to librarian training, it has dominated the technical education approach. Consequently, there has not been developed a LIS education whose approach would be the development of intellectual guidelines that allow implementation of a teaching based on theory with concerns on ideas and cognitive problems explaining the discipline.

Indeed, despite the close link between theory and practice in LIS, sometimes can be perceived an education based essentially on the latter approach, arguing the existence of an inadequate theory or that it is unrealistic for everyday library problems. Likewise, in the other hand, it can also be seen in LIS education, an approach entirely theoretical, disconnected from the practice, far away from how learning can be put into action, where students are not able of giving meaning and utility to their learning.

LIS education based on theory and practice

In discussing training of librarians, it can not be ignored the double dimension in which LIS education should be contextualized; in one hand, an approach

based on everyday reality, and on the other one, a perspective based on a theoretical framework that attempts to shed light on processes and library activities. However, sometimes LIS educators despise the theoretical dimension for considering it unrealistic. Likewise, LIS theorists sometimes underestimate those working in the front lines, considering their lack of theoretical formation as a constraint to optimize their work.

Regarding to this point, it has been pointed out by Moran (2001) the following: "Librarians and educators operate in their separate worlds. There is too little interaction between them. Many librarians have little firsthand experience with library education after they graduate. They do not go back to the schools for alumni functions, and often their knowledge of what is happening in the schools comes to them second-or third hand.

On the other hand, library educators have not succeeded in communicating well with the profession. Most do not have recent work experience in libraries. They often move in new directions in the schools without fully explaining the rationale. Owing to limited resources, they have not been sufficiently responsive to some legitimate needs of the profession."

Nevertheless, practice and theory are intrinsically linked. The theory comes from practice and practice stems from the theory. Theoretical formulations emerge from practice and practice derives on theoretical formulations. One theory disconnected from the practice, that does not take it as the starting point and that is not leading to it, that does not allow it to be put into action, ignoring the daily reality, is not able to give meaning and value to learning. Conversely, any action or practice is based on the theory. What happens sometimes is their relationships are not explicit.

In LIS practice, to set objectives, to make decisions and to solve conflicts, are activities that involve actions, but also theory. Every practice is supported by a theory that explains it, but also there is a theory emerged from the practice and reflections of other individuals who can help to understand the actions. It is inappropriate that some professionals, especially those considered as practitioners, try to present theory as an uncomfortable and annoying partner. Likewise, practitioners tend to set up a dichotomy between a theory in the clouds and the harsh daily practice.

Traditionally, LIS has been viewed as an empirical profession, eminently for service, so it is often believed that does not require theory. However, although

for many years librarians solved their problems based on intuition and experience, making right decisions for a smooth running of the library and its services, their actions need to be based on theoretical foundations. Therefore, by no means it is not rejected a theoretical focus on the empirical and social issues that society require to graduates of this field of knowledge to solve their daily issues. One function of LIS schools should be training of qualified specialists, developing in them a critical thought. The task of LIS education should focus on the acquisition of skills, habits and attitudes that allow students a permanent inquiry of issues (Allendez Sullivan, 2012).

Regarding to the LIS discussion between theory and practice, it may be perceived, to a certain extent, LIS education has moved from a perspective focused on techniques to another one that recognizes the epistemic status of the discipline. This latter point has been stated in different ways, looking for strengthening of the theoretical field of our discipline, better librarian formation and professional identity.

Nevertheless, "positions are hardening in the growing rift between the educators and the practitioners in the library field. Many practitioners are convinced that the library and information science (LIS) schools have either abandoned educating librarians or that they are not educating them well (or both). Library educators are persuaded that many practitioners are out of touch with what goes on both in the programs and in present-day higher education. Folks from each side talk at the other, but few of their messages are heard. It is time to end the argument and find ways to work together" (Moran, 2001).

About these issues, Worrall (2011) has pointed out that: "There are at least three camps that emerge from the ongoing and recurring tension. In the first are those who argue it is better to provide students with a broad based education that, rather than teaching specific procedures and practices, focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of these so that they can adapt and respond to an ever-changing environment. In the second, we find those who argue practical skills and knowledge will serve students better in finding employment, believing educational efforts should focus on practical, hands-on experiences that guide students towards fulfilling positions in the field. Finally, a third camp often emerges in reaction to the first two, arguing that both theoretical and practical training and knowledge are required of future library and information professionals, in equal amounts so as to span the divide between the first two approaches to curricula" (Worrall, 2011).

Thus, it is important to consider both theory and practice, as essential and complementary elements, and therefore, to be maintained in a smooth and proper relationship. If there is an excess of each one, the profession degenerates. LIS has been criticized for being more than one discipline, a profession eminently practical, where its rules are based on reaching specific pragmatic purposes and it seems not to be not clear its theoretical structure. However, like every practical discipline, it also rests on theoretical foundations, and its practice rules include themselves a value judgment (Allendez Sullivan, 2012).

Moran (2001) has also pointed out that LIS schools "try to incorporate both theory and practice. They attempt to balance the competing demands of preparing students to perform well as professionals over the long term and to function at top effectiveness from day one in a specific job. [Nevertheless] Inevitably theory often takes precedence over practice. In educating for any profession, it is the long-term effectiveness of the education that must be the focus. That dictates emphasis on basic principles, theory, and foundations, not on the details of practice. These details should be woven into the fabric of courses that focus on the design and structure of information and access to it. If LIS schools wish to remain part of academe, they must emphasize education, not training."

Additionally, a review of different authors and institutions that directly or indirectly addressed the LIS education issue through the dichotomy "theoretical" and "practice", or referring specifically to the teaching methods, and even curriculum guidelines, shows that it is unobjectionable today the need to orient the discipline toward a teaching having as its working focus the theory that constitute it, which mark the difference with the professional practical field.

Finally, it is important to point out the position of Worrall (2011) who states that: "There has certainly been substantial literature written on the tension of theory- and practice-based curricula in LIS, and by no means is it all in agreement, as evidenced above. Nevertheless, one conclusion seems clear: the best approaches to curricula are those that attempt to span the divide between the two ends of the continuum, exploring the area between them and working to bring practitioners and theoreticians together to educate future librarians and information professionals"

Likewise, it is convenient to take into account the following research questions this author (Worrall, 2011) proposes to answer in order to find an agreement between LIS theory and practice:

“1. Do changes in LIS curricula with a more practice-focused orientation, intended to address practitioner concerns, improve the ability for students to succeed in their jobs?

2. How can [a] model be used to span the divide between theory- and practice-based LIS curricula?

3. Can a LIS collaboration for curriculum development help reduce the divide between theory- and practice-based LIS education? How should it be implemented for the greatest success?

4. How can service learning and/or evidence-based librarianship be used to help span the divide between theory and practice in LIS curricula in a variety of settings and contexts?”

LIS education trends in Latin America

As in other parts of the world, the dichotomy in professional training also occurs in LIS education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Rodriguez Gallardo (2010) in his book "Formación humanista del bibliotecólogo: hacia su recuperación [Humanistic training for librarians: toward its recovery]", after an analysis of LIS education at international level and in Mexico, stated: The approach that has been taught in most schools until now, has promoted the repetition of technical activities, focusing on the technology use, as if in its use would be found the discipline paradigms."

He also emphasizes the biggest problem of LIS education is the lack of ability to work with concepts that contain a strong sense of abstraction. In the LIS education has been followed a system of “evident” truths that are not discussed, which are seen as absolute knowledge and not as products of the human thought and, therefore, subject to constant rethinking and enrichment.

Nevertheless these statements, conversely, students are dissatisfied with LIS education they receive having a set of legitimate concerns. Some students complete their LIS formation without taking what they believe are essential practice in courses such as reference, cataloging, and classification.

In a survey among alumni from a Mexican LIS school, Reyna Gamez Rojas & Hinojosa (2006) found that a large majority of respondents (56%) felt that more practice should be included in their training; likewise, another significant proportion (33%) proposed the inclusion of more workshops in their training. They indicated that subjects with greater impact on the library field as classification, cataloging and reference, needed constant practice because of the tools used to carry out them. Further, they noted, a lack of balance between theory and practice and the need for spaces to perform satisfactorily the latter one.

Likewise, De la Vega & Arakaki (2011) have pointed out the importance of practice in LIS education, noting that in competences-based education, professional practices acquire a special role. If in diverse education approaches, they have always been the bridge between the college and the work world, competences-based approach highlights the need for training not only an education oriented to gain knowledge and skills, but also focused on development of student skills, values and attitudes that will be transferred to the workplace and in their personal life. In the practice, students are faced with challenges that test their professional or technical skills, and also the personal ones. Additionally, test their ability to relate well with others, to cooperate, to work together and act within heterogeneous groups, and in general, to perform with ethics and social responsibility. Referring to professional practices developed in LIS program at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, they said that are intended to: (a) exercise the skills and knowledge acquired by students during their studies (b) demonstrate in concrete situations, the skills acquired and their suitability for the proper praxis of the profession, and (c) provide the link between the academic formation and the professional life of graduates.

Nevertheless, since the late sixties, Taste (1968) considered that there was a general tendency to support the value of the theoretical and to promote "a very clear dominance on the practice, a hierarchy of the two currents, always in favor of principles on practice standards." She also pointed out that the more general statement was "harmony" as the real key issue, but insisting that librarians must have a creative mind and that learning practices were not the best means to achieve it. It was necessary that the librarian would be able, in a given situation, to react by choosing the best path to reach the fairest solution, not so much what had been taught for that particular case, but the theories and

principles he/she knew and having sufficient security in his/her judgment to apply them to any situation.

Gascón, Comalat Espelt, Dexter, Rubio, Salse, & Vall (2009) also have pointed out that: “The articulation of theory and practice in university careers, especially those training for a technical profession (or one with an important practical component), should have as objective not only that students learn to execute some activities, but that they to carry out these activities exercising their intelligence and using the theoretical know-how previously acquired. Only when a student, he himself, relate the practice to the learned theory, only when he reflect on the experience and the specific case he has worked on, we could be sure that a practical activity, as a part of the education, has been satisfactory.”

With regard to this integration, Lafuente and Morales (1992) have proposed that teaching of principles and theories should be focused on the understanding of phenomena essence, with the objective that students owns sufficient knowledge to identify them, but also waiting at all times they be able to link this knowledge with their pragmatic applicability, regardless of any curriculum or study program. They point out that LIS schools should give priority in their teaching methods and techniques to attitudes and situations such as:

- a) The relationship between research and teaching.
- b) The exercise of analysis and critique.
- c) An attitude of change and adaptation.
- d) An understanding of what is done in the world

Undoubtedly, LIS education transition from an approach in which predominates the practice, or conversely, a theoretical option completely disconnected from reality, to another one where there is a balance of these two, requires a new conceptualization of LIS based on the following three methodological guidelines: The first one holds that LIS is built upon phenomena, concepts and theories. The second guideline underlines the crucial role played by the intellectual history of LIS concepts and theories. And the third one is centered on the conceptual change undergone by LIS students (Rios Ortega, 2007).

Firstly, it is necessary to identify those entities that constitute the study matter of our discipline. Students who start their LIS learning must employ a number of expressions which are only intelligible in this discipline. Terms like "work", "document", "user" or "information life cycle" are theoretical entities expressed in a specialized language and they can be also matter of representation and abstraction.

Subsequently, the student must know and understand the LIS historical perspective, which will allow them to understand the conceptual variations and theoretical changes. Study of the LIS history will allow them to reconstruct and reinterpret in a more objective and realistic approach, the work of the discipline, their constituents and the theoretical issues that have been postulated.

Finally, it is necessary a conceptual shift in how students learn. It is required greater emphasis on the processes of learning assimilation and accommodation, rather than the "syllabus" or program content. However, for avoiding the learning would be only an assimilation process without actually materialize the accommodation phase, it is imperative to generate a cognitive conflict. The constructivism theory has made fundamental contributions to analyze and propose improvements in LIS education. The two essential premises that it takes as start points are: 1. the mind plays an active role in the construction of knowledge, and 2. concepts are created by individuals rather than discovered. It is a process where it is necessary to build, to develop and to give meaning to knowledge.

Gascón, Comalat Espelt Dexterity, Rubio, Salse, & Vall (2009) have considered some advantages of applying this form of learning in LIS, but also some of its difficulties: "It is a kind of subject that really force the student to make links among different concepts learned along the courses and to think about facts and activities he is doing. Its assessment has also to be comprehensive, evaluating elements as cross competencies or personal attitudes, usually not assessed in other subjects. More than professors, now is the student the main actor playing in his own learning process and through internship he may aware of it. However, we could find several problems that cause worse results in assessment. These problems are connected to lack of maturity or background: dissociation of theoretical and practical issues, difficulties in preparing essays or thinking about a process like internship, and so on."

This learning approach has been applied in LIS education in several cases, including the following. Martinez Arellano, Salinas, & Cebrowski, C. (2002) applied the techniques of the learning based on projects (Project Oriented Learning, POL) in the course 'Organization of the Information', at the Master of Library and Information Science offered by the Virtual University of the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM). Quindemil Torrijo (2010) reports its application for the "introduction of the information literacy" in the LIS specialty programs in Cuba. It has also been used in cataloger training at the Universidad Nacional del Sur de Bahia Blanca, Argentina (Herrera, 2004). Likewise, its application in the course "Information Organizations Management" at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima Perú, has been mentioned (Huisa Veria & Alfaro, 2008).

Final considerations

Discussion of LIS education approaches, a practical and a theoretical focus, has been present over time and it continues to date, which can be confirmed in the professional literature. Likewise, it is possible to observe that despite the criticisms made on training for "practice", this approach has been present for decades. Moreover, in the orientation of LIS training, the approach for a technical education has dominated

Notwithstanding the foregoing, it can be observed that LIS education has begun to move from a perspective focused on practice and techniques to a conceptualization that recognizes the theoretical status of the discipline. This transition from an alternative where only the practice prevail, or from a theoretical option completely disconnected from reality, to another one where there is a balance of these two approaches, requires a reconceptualization of the discipline based on three methodological guidelines: The first one states LIS is built upon phenomena, concepts and theories. The second one underlines the crucial role played by the intellectual history of LIS concepts and theories. And the third one is centered on a conceptual change undergone by LIS students.

In the third of these guidelines, the tendency of constructivism in education plays an important role. It is something that must be taken into consideration since it allows student to create their own procedures to solve problems. This learning process takes place as a dynamic, participatory and interactive work by students, so knowledge is a true construction based on theoretical facets. Therefore, this educational trend can help to establish a balance between theory and practice in LIS education.

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