

Beatriz Hardy at the Maryland Historical Society: Crafting the Knowledge Services / Research Connection

Among knowledge professionals, the ongoing debate seems to be about whether knowledge services is a methodology best (and only) applied in special libraries, or whether it can be usefully applied for other types of research. Indeed, in most discussions the question becomes one of whether knowledge development/knowledge sharing (KD/KS) is *limited* to that “practical and utilitarian” information transfer that John Cotton Dana was seeking when he and his friends founded SLA in 1909.

Certainly not. The convergence of information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning can be—and often is—applied in traditional librarianship. Taking advantage of knowledge services in the management of a library that functions to provide scholarly and educational resources to a public for which scholarship and education (and indeed librarianship) define the mission of the organization is not so unusual. A case in point, and an exceptionally good example of KD/KS in action, is the work of Beatriz Hardy at the H. Furlong Baldwin Library of the Maryland Historical Society.

Dr. Hardy was called to the Society in 2002 to be the France-Merrick Deputy Director, with responsibility for managing the Baldwin Library. She brought with her an impressive set of credentials in historical scholarship, including two graduate degrees in history. As for her other professional credential, it was after she was on the job that Hardy tackled—and was awarded—the Master of Library Science from the University of Maryland at College Park. She probably wasn’t required to have that extra master’s degree, but she wanted it for two reasons. First of all, having the professional degree would strengthen her effectiveness with the staff and make her a better supervisor, an important goal for Hardy since she was required to oversee a serious change management and change implementation effort in the library. At the same time, though, Hardy wanted the professional degree for its credentialing value to the outside world: “With the library degree,” she says, “I can be a more effective advocate for the Baldwin Library, so the degree strengthens my credentials both inside and outside the library.”

It is not difficult to understand why one would want to be an advocate for the Baldwin Library. Indeed, a first visit is a treat, for the public space housing the library is quite spectacular, and it is a pleasure just to go in and have a look. Built in 1917-1919, the library’s elegant cast-iron columns seem to invite the reader to sit and ponder the mysteries of a world long past (which is, of course, what draws many people to historical research in the first place). With an important rebuilding of the Society’s overall facility in 2003, the library’s Main Reading Room—now the Walter Edgar Rhodes Reading Room—was enlarged to provide seating for 24 users. In the Alexander A. McIlvain Special Collections Reading Room, seating space for readers was doubled, as was the library storage space. Now with space for effectively managing public services, as well as space for all the “backroom” operations that all libraries and information centers must deal with on an on-going basis, Hardy and her colleagues can concentrate on developing a knowledge-centric services operation for the library’s many users.

For a library like the one at the Maryland Historical Society (www.mdhs.org/explore/library.html), there’s no question but that traditional librarianship is the driver. Traditional librarianship (or “classical librarianship,” as some say) builds on a style of service delivery that ensures that library services are available for scholars and the public as those users expect them to be provided. Much of that expectation, of course, has to do with the library as a cultural institution, which is surely the case with the Baldwin Library. Indeed, at the Maryland Historical Society, the very collections establish the library as a cultural icon for the state and, if you emphasize its most famous item—the autograph manuscript of Francis Scott Key’s “The Star-Spangled Banner”—for the entire United States as well.

When cultural institutions, including libraries, are managed in a businesslike way, and when the management approach converges information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning, so much the better. Certainly this seems to be the philosophy that Beatriz Hardy brings to the Maryland Historical Society. Responsible for providing a wide variety of research services to their patrons, Hardy and her colleagues (ten staff and 30+ volunteers, many of whom have been affiliated with the library

Knowledge Services:

Converging Information Management, Knowledge Management, and Strategic, Performance-Centered Learning

for more than 20 years) are well attuned to the expectations of their users. Somewhere between five and ten percent of the library's users are interested in local history, almost half of them are involved in genealogical research, and another 20% are scholars focusing on the library's exceptional special collections. It is Hardy's task to see that these users' expectations are given the attention they deserve and, especially, to see that the collections are used, so that the knowledge developed through the facilities and collections of the library can be shared as the readers see fit to share it. At the Maryland Historical Society, with Beatriz Hardy in charge of the library, KD/KS is alive and well.

A first example is her current effort with respect to the Society's photographic collection, some 800,000 photographs, until recently organized by collection and not by subject (probably not the most efficient way to let picture researchers find what they are looking for). With expertise in information management and especially with the technical aspects of electronic information capture (Hardy also serves as Editor-in-Chief of the *Maryland Online Encyclopedia*), she now has been put in charge of the Society's Department of Imaging Services (formerly under the Publications Division). Enthusiastic about this new assignment, Hardy is taking access provision for the Society's photographs to a new dimension, one in which the images will be infinitely more usable and, not to put too fine a point on it, accessible to many more scholars and citizens who want to view these treasured images of Maryland's past. Even though the new imaging database has yet to make its public debut, it is already a success, having reduced turnaround time for filling requests from 4-5 months to within 14 business days. A spectacular accomplishment indeed.

It is not just images, though, that researchers want when they come to historical societies. As mentioned earlier, genealogy is a primary emphasis and has been for many years, thanks to the good work of many fine volunteers who keep the files in order. The Society's records, dating back to the early 19th century, are well used by visitors, both professional genealogists and non-professionals who, like many Americans, take a special personal interest in family history. Providing an interesting link to those early family records is a vast array of other early materials, including unique materials such as the Society's Upton Scott Collection, medical and scientific works that provide a wonderful "snapshot" (as Dr. Hardy described it) of knowledge available to 18th century physicians.

Other popular collections include the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, used by building researchers. The popularity of this kind of material is not hard to understand in this age so fascinated with architectural history, the re-building and gentrification of entire neighborhoods, and the popularization of do-it-yourself projects. These records, dating from 1879 to 1969, are intriguing and provide very detailed depictions of what Baltimore buildings were like, and it is easy to see why people would want to come to the Baldwin Library to find details that they can duplicate or build upon in current projects.

Strategic learning, the knowledge sharing "piece" of knowledge services, is not neglected at the Maryland Historical Society, and the best example might be the fellowship program offered to researchers who want to come to Baltimore to do their work. Part of Hardy's charge was to transform the library into a research center, and one of her first efforts was to set up a fellowship program for research studies in history. The first year, the library was deluged with applications, and 13 fellows were selected, including international scholars, and there are nine in the current class.

At the other end of the research spectrum, the Society and the Baldwin Library have embarked on a very successful research training program for young people. SeaRCH, the Student Research Center for History, has been organized in conjunction with the Society's Education Division. Using a specially designed dedicated space, SeaRCH provides secondary school students and teachers with a place to go for help in using original manuscripts, photographs, and other sources from the Library's collections for research projects, thus ensuring that future scholars have an appropriate and viable introduction to research methods.

It is an impressive record, and there is no question but that Beatriz Hardy is successful in bringing the library at the Maryland Historical Society to a new level of service. Without specifically identifying her leadership skills as those of knowledge services, Hardy provides other library managers in the scholarly and more "traditional" library milieu with a good model for successful service delivery.

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