Changing Roles of Professional and Paraprofessional Catalogers, 1990–2000

To gain perspective on how professional and paraprofessional catalogers’ roles have changed in relation to each other the last seven years or so, it is useful to consider a starting point for when the roles began to shift. Johnson (1996) notes that prior to the early to mid 1970s, librarians handled nearly all cataloging, since searching and modifying records from the national printed catalogs were considered an intellectual exercise requiring professional training. However, she writes, with the advent of the bibliographic utilities and shared, machine-readable records, the process has become more routine and is a part of the paraprofessional’s skill set. She adds that a second tier of paraprofessionals has emerged since then, one that includes unit managers and individuals who can contribute to library planning initiatives. She posits that paraprofessionals’ familiarity with the automated system makes them well equipped to contribute to decision-making in the library.

Further, writes Johnson, while higher level paraprofessionals are tackling higher level cataloging and even taking on some managerial roles, librarians face the increasing expectation to assume roles beyond cataloging, such as strategic planning and management. They are also expected to participate in national and area conferences and publish in order to satisfy promotion or tenure requirements. Johnson stresses the need for librarians to communicate to their paraprofessional colleagues just what it is they are doing when they are out of their offices and away from cataloging, and why. She implies that resentment and feelings of inequity on the part of the paraprofessionals might lessen with direct communication from the librarians. She adds that ensuring that paraprofessionals, who spend so much of their time in their offices performing routine tasks, may also experience a higher level of job satisfaction if they are given higher-level duties that will challenge them.

Eskoz’s survey (1990) of academic libraries conducted from 1983–84 and 1986–87 shows a gradual increase in higher level cataloging among paraprofessionals. Bénaud (1992) finds that literature from 1981 identifies the most significant trend in research about paraprofessionals as the tendency for large libraries to assign more tasks to paraprofessionals than small libraries. Bénaud’s article holds that by 1992, professional librarians are taking on more and more responsibilities that leave less time for cataloging. She addresses the need for a different kind of attitude towards paraprofessionals, in the areas of terminology (paraprofessional versus support staff versus library assistant, etc.), experience versus MLS (should higher level paraprofessionals be compensated accordingly), and supervisory experience (in certain cases, why can’t a higher level paraprofessional supervise a professional). She asserts that catalog maintenance has often become an area of paraprofessional expertise and that professional catalogers would do well to become as familiar with the details of creating and maintaining online records, loading or transferring records, etc.

In a discussion at the ALA Midwinter Meeting (Myers 1996), Intner observes that while change in cataloging (and other departments) has been occurring for a long time, technical decision-making defines what paraprofessionals are doing, while strategic decision-making defines what librarians are doing. This line of thinking supports those of Johnson and Bénaud, though those authors also suggest that paraprofessionals have also become involved in strategic decision-making, largely as a function of their growing expertise with automated and online systems. In her look at recruiting and training the paraprofessional cataloger, Nevin (1997) recognizes the importance of providing opportunities for interacting with fellow practitioners via state, regional, or national avenues, such as conferences, online discussion groups, and professional journals. In Nevin’s view, the role of the paraprofessional will only continue to intensify, due to factors such as downsizing, automation, and newly emerging library services.

And what of the changing role of the professional cataloger? El-Sherbini and Klim (1997) write that while original cataloging is increasingly being assigned to paraprofessional staff, catalog librarians are taking on priorities such as staff education and training, product quality control, and workflow management. Mohr and Schuneman’s survey (1997) finds that about 77% of ARL library respondents are indeed assigning
some original cataloging tasks to paraprofessionals. Reasons for such assignment include: cost savings, volume, and paraprofessional career development (support thereof). In regard to cost savings, Mohr and Schuneman concur with an observation Williams (1991) makes: compared to paraprofessionals, librarians are relatively expensive because they spend less time cataloging and more time outside of the units in which they work. Like Bénaud, Mohr and Schuneman recognize the challenge posed by increasingly high-skilled paraprofessionals working alongside librarians for lower pay. They suggest that higher-level paraprofessionals should be paid more for their experience, and, if they are supervising, should be able to sit in with librarians in policy-making arenas. They reiterate that, along with adequate compensation, challenging work can help increase job satisfaction. They outline the need for further research in how roles are changing between paraprofessionals and professionals and suggests conducting a survey of both groups, inside the library profession and within other professions. They raise the sociological question of whether the library profession is maturing or whether its highest-level professional functions are being deskilled.

In their ten-year study of the cataloging department at the California State University at Northridge, Wakimoto and Hsiung (2000) find a dramatic shift in duties between paraprofessionals and professionals. They cite such contributing factors as declining budget, the earthquake of 1994, technological advances, and current trends. Perhaps the most important factor leading to the shift has to do with the advent of integrated workstations, including access to Catalogers’ Desktop, Classification Plus, and an online cataloging manual. Whereas cataloging duties were previously divided among students, paraprofessionals, and librarians, now workflow is better streamlined, fewer staff need to handle materials, and there may be less margin for error (due to enhanced editing capability in the Windows environment). Output is apparently greater—with fewer staff, and librarians have more time to attend to outreach activities, both on campus and within the community.

**Next Steps**

The lines between professionals and paraprofessionals have continued to blur for a long time, and evidence suggests that this trend will only continue. Due to factors such as budgetary considerations, downsizing, and technology that has helped revolutionize the workflow and reorganization trends, paraprofessionals are playing an increasingly important role in cataloging departments. Their ability to take on higher-level skills and become involved in policy-making bodies is increasingly accepted by library administrators and is becoming more the norm. Admittedly, the need for such changes in job description, salary and changes in corporate culture to be well documented and supported is a real one. Communication between librarians and paraprofessionals, as Johnson (1996) points out, might help lessen feelings of inequity between the two parties. However, it would also be interesting to study how library administrations and department heads are (or have been) conveying the redefined roles to their staff.

In order to get a pulse on how the roles of professional and paraprofessional catalogers are evolving now and in the future, it would be important to study the literature on the birth and emergence of metadata services within technical services departments. As libraries strive to provide competitive service to their faculty, students, and other patrons, librarians may well find themselves devoting more time to activities outside the realm of “traditional cataloging,” i.e., managing metadata, helping build digital repositories, networking with potential stakeholders, etc. This likely will lead to a continued reliance on paraprofessionals for maintaining databases and online systems and for continuing to help guide related policy decisions.

**Works Cited**


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