Serial Conversations

Cataloging Education and Cataloging Futures: An Interview with Allyson Carlyle

Margaret Dull, Contributor

Abstract:

In February 2011 Margaret Dull interviewed Allyson Carlyle, Associate Professor and Chair of the Ph.D. program at the iSchool, University of Washington (Seattle, Washington). Carlyle shares her views on the current challenges faced by both catalogers and cataloging educators. Carlyle also discusses the vital role that cataloging plays in today’s library science curriculum, as well as the future role of the professional cataloger.

Article:

In his 1965 article “On Teaching Cataloging”, Seymour Lubetzky wrote: “We are about to witness a profound transformation of the rules which have shaped the catalogs of our libraries for many years, and the occasion seems to call for a pause to reflect on the implications for the teaching of cataloging.”1 In 2008 Ingrid Hsieh-Yee mused that “[f]or the library and information science profession to thrive in the changing environment the best strategy is to ensure cataloging education is multi-faceted and encompasses the competencies they will need to function effectively.”2 Today, many in the library profession perceive our own “profound transformation” in the development of a new cataloging code: Resource Description and Access (RDA). The traditional model of the bibliographic universe has been called into question with the increasing influence of theoretical models such as the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR). This shift in cataloging practice and theory can be viewed as a byproduct of other challenges confronting the library community, such as rapid changes in technology and the profusion of non-library information managers/metadata producers. The ubiquity of search engines and other such gateways to information in daily life changes the ways in which users approach information and the library catalog (historically one of the most important services libraries provide to their communities), if they approach it at all.

These changes come at a time when libraries and librarians are facing difficult choices in terms of funding and employment, particularly in regards to cataloging staffing and expertise. The increasingly broader focus of library education on the theory of information organization over the practical ins-and-outs of creating effective bibliographic descriptions appears presents a further difficulty to a profession Taken together, these changes demand librarians pause to think critically not only about cataloging practice, but also about cataloging education and library education as a whole. Cataloging and, more importantly, cataloging education may prove to be a litmus test for the successful future of the profession as we rise together to meet these challenges.

Some perspective on the above issues is provided by Allyson Carlyle, Associate Professor and Chair of the Ph.D. Program at the University of Washington’s Information School. Her paper, "Fulfilling the Second Objective in the Online Catalog:  Schemes for Organizing Author and Work Records Into Usable Displays" won the 1998 Jesse H. Shera Award for Distinguished Published Research given by the Library Research Round Table of the American Library Association. She is also the recipient of the 2000 OCLC/ALISE Research Paper Award for "Developing Organized Information Displays for Voluminous Works: A Study of User Clustering Behavior."  Carlyle’s primary research areas are the evaluation and use of online catalogs, and foundations of descriptive cataloging.  She has also written about conceptual modeling of documents, and plans future work in that area. Professor Carlyle has an MLS and a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Margaret Dull (MD): Can you share with us your background as a library professional, particularly as a cataloger? How did you come to this area of librarianship and why did you stay?

Allyson Carlyle (AC): I worked in libraries most of my life prior to becoming a cataloging professor. I worked in my grade school, high school, college, and grad school libraries. I was a paraprofessional in all of these jobs. I was only ever a librarian once, at Beverly Hills Public Library (BHPL), where I worked as a part time children’s reference librarian (which I loved, by the way). Because I thought I knew everything, I wasn’t convinced I wanted a library degree, but I decided to take a cataloging class, which had been highly recommended to me, to see if I really wanted to apply. The class, taught by Betty Baughman, who co-taught at UCLA for many years with Seymour Lubetzky, blew me away. No one in all of my jobs had ever really taught me anything about cataloging. Before taking that class, I had no idea of how the catalog really worked. It made me frustrated that I’d never been instructed before because I’d have been a much better searcher and would have been much more able to help the library users I’d served over the years.

Prior to taking this beginning cataloging class with Betty, I thought that cataloging was the least interesting part of library work. I would never have predicted that I would come to be a passionate supporter of cataloging, much less a cataloging professor.

MD: What brought you into the field of library education?

AC: Three things. First was my advisor, Elaine Svenonius. Toward the end of my MLS program, Elaine started bugging me about getting a PhD. At the time, I couldn’t possibly imagine this. I come from a working class background, and it was hard for me to see myself getting a PhD because it was so totally not within my experience. But, I thought about it.

Second was my next-door neighbor at the time, Norman. I was agonizing about this one evening with him and he looked at me and said “Well, why don’t you just try it? If you don’t like it, you can quit.” In all of my tortured thinking about it, it had not occurred to me that this was an option. So, I decided to go for it, and if I didn’t like it, I’d just quit and get a job as a librarian.

Third was my excitement about cataloging practice and theory. I loved this stuff. I still do.

MD: In your time as a practicing librarian, what did you see to be the greatest challenges to the field of librarianship?

AC: My job at Beverly Hills was atypical. At that time, BHPL had lots of money. There was no cataloging backlog. We were able to give top notch service. I worked there in the early 1990s, which was prior to the Internet explosion. Everyone was still printing out every e-mail they got. Who could know what was going to happen, what the challenges would be? Honestly, I don’t remember thinking about this all that much. My biggest concern then, as now, was that our online catalogs simply didn’t function the way they had the potential to function.

MD: In your time as a library educator, what do you see to be the greatest challenges to the field of librarianship? To library education?

AC: Unlike other people, I am (usually) not afraid for the future of libraries. As long as we are educating intelligent, passionate, service-oriented people, our libraries will be fine. They may not look exactly the way they look today, but the essence of what we do, which is to steward and provide access to the world’s knowledge (however that might be defined for specific audiences), to serve our communities (whoever our specific audiences are) and to provide space for our communities to learn and work in, won’t change much, I don’t think. I could say a lot more here, but I think this is it in a nutshell.

In my opinion, one of the biggest challenges to library education is to remain calm in a tumultuous time where so many otherwise intelligent people are making so many unsubstantiated, outlandish claims. Libraries won’t have books tomorrow (really? tomorrow?). Young people don’t read books (ever looked at how many copies of books by J.K. Rowling have sold over the past few years? Looked at the circulation figures for *The Hunger Games* series lately?). We don’t need catalogs because Google Books will do it all for a lot less (I won’t even start, but let’s just note that Google Books will take every single bit of cataloging data from us that we will give them; if cataloging is so useless, why would they want it?).

The truth is that libraries are facing an extremely challenging time. I think it’s wonderful, in a way, as shocking as that sounds. I so believe in libraries as the stewards of the world’s knowledge, and how wonderful is it that so much of it is available on the Internet, for free, retrievable in an instant? I’m thrilled at the inventiveness that has been called out because of these challenges. Kiosks scattered throughout town so that users can pick up their holds more conveniently than coming to the library – wow! It’s good for public institutions to be shaken up so that they don’t fall into a sleepy complacency. Challenging times make us very alert to what our communities most need from us. That’s a good thing.

MD: How are you and your colleagues at the iSchool at the University of Washington responding these challenges, particularly in terms of cataloging education? How do these challenges impact both your curriculum and your teaching methods?

AC: We are reviewing our core curriculum. This is something that ALA accreditation requires on a regular basis anyway, so it makes sense to do it. We are just beginning this process and I’m not on the committee working on this, so I can’t say anything about where it might go, but I’m confident that we will make good decisions. I know that we’ve solicited a lot of feedback from faculty, current students, and alumni, so we will have had a lot of input in the process.

With respect to cataloging education (specifically, our beginning and advanced cataloging classes), we are on hold for a bit. The cataloging world is in a pretty volatile place right now, and we’re not sure that it would be wise to move forward too quickly. As I said this morning on the cataloging educators’ e-mail list:

“It is my strong belief that you need to teach people [in cataloging classes] how to \*think\* about cataloging, not how to catalog. You can do that using any set of rules. UW students may feel less than prepared without the kind of intro to RDA that they probably need, but I have confidence that if they take both beginning and advanced cataloging (and if they apply themselves when doing so) they will be good catalogers/good administrators because once they learn the new standard, they will know how to apply it.

This quarter's enthusiastic, fabulous (the best I've taught so far, as a group) advanced cataloging students are totally out in RDA land already, reading, thinking, pointing out differences, problems - they are, I confess, way ahead of me. I'm so proud of them, and if we are turning out catalogers half this motivated and thoughtful, we are in good shape in the future.

Other than to teach them how to think about cataloging, what should I do? My answer is to keep them as excited about cataloging as I possibly can, fostering their high level of interest, encouraging them to think and explore.

Ultimately, I care much more about these two things than I do about teaching them a code of rules.”3

MD: A number of articles have investigated the role that cataloging plays in the curriculum of library science programs.4 These works reveal a general trend where programs are moving away from cataloging courses as a requirement and towards either making these courses optional or requiring courses on the organization of information. What are your thoughts on this trend and its impact on the library profession?

AC: I’m of two minds about this. First mind: I prefer a single degree, the MLIS, as opposed to two degrees, MLS and MIS. If you have a single degree, you need to be responsive to an audience that is broader than the library audience, even though the majority of students may be interested in libraries. This means that you begin with the organization of information more broadly. Required? No question. Making a program MLIS, a single program, means that graduates have a more flexible degree that gives them a larger range of employment possibilities.

One of my favorite courses to teach, although I haven’t taught it for a while, is the introduction to information organization. It teaches the fundamentals of organization of information in all settings, or at least, that is the goal. If we were to make the required course in an MLIS program a cataloging course, we would (a) risk losing the people who are not interested in libraries – I like the idea of softly luring them in myself and (b) not be providing anyone with the fundamental theoretical underpinnings of this area, which are absolutely necessary for our students to have.

Second mind: Teaching a course that is largely theory based (information organization) before teaching cataloging (a particular practical implementation of information organization in a particular setting) is rough. Ideally, you would teach theory alongside practice. Unfortunately, there is not enough time to do this. When you are working with a ten week quarter, you are really limited in what you can accomplish. I know how hard our information organization course is for students who don’t come with experience in either metadata or cataloging, and I am very sympathetic to how confusing it is at first. In the best of all possible worlds, you would do a two course required sequence, where you would introduce theory along with practice. However, we already have too many core courses and I’m not going to win a fight with faculty to require two information organization courses instead of one, sorry to say.

MD: In his 2002 article on the changing place of cataloging in library and information science curriculum, Saye writes: “There can be no doubt that the perception of cataloging as an essential knowledge requirement for graduates of our master’s programs has taken a serious decline. Although there is some exposure to cataloging, at least as its most general and theoretical level, in an organization of information course, no data are readily available of the number of students who elect to follow that course with a cataloging course.”5 In your experience as an educator, does this perception ring true? How often do you perceive students moving from the more general organization of information courses into cataloging courses?

AC: We teach three cataloging courses a year, and that tells me that the majority of our MLIS students are taking cataloging. We are lucky to have the strongest information organization/cataloging faculty around. Every year I send out an email message to students recommending what I call a “librarian core” – that is, a core of courses beyond our required courses, which includes cataloging, reference, and collection development (see this link, which looks like it needs updating: <http://faculty.washington.edu/acarlyle/librariancourses.html>). I am so sad when alums come back to me and say how sorry they are that they didn’t follow my advice and take cataloging. I am sad, but I warn people in every possible way how sorry they will be if they don’t take it. So what if you get a B because you think you won’t be good at it, or you didn’t like the information organization course, or you just had to take that other course on whatever? None of these reasons fly with me. I do wish we could require it for everyone who wants to work in a library, but as I said above, it’ not possible. I’ll be pulling for informal specializations in our revised curriculum, which would allow for my list of librarian core courses to become a bit more formalized, and with luck, more compelling for students interested in libraries to take.

MD: The literature of cataloging education—and library education in general—often indicates a tension between the educators preparing future librarians and the professionals who hire them, due, perhaps, to their differing perspectives on the same issues (Sayre 2002; Lynch 2008 etc.). What is your perception of this tension? Is this something that educators can ameliorate, perhaps via increased communication as suggested by Letarte et al. (2001) and others?

AC: In my personal experience, there’s little to no tension. In fact, just the opposite, I am told our graduates are great. [Of course, it could be people are afraid of me, and won’t tell me the truth ☺] **Beverly????**

Seattle is a fabulous place for a cataloging professor to be. The catalogers at the UW are completely and totally awesome. They are supportive – they will meet with us, give guest lectures, answer a million email questions about current practice, and give good ideas for exercises when requested. They give our students amazing fieldwork experiences. I love them and feel like I am part of a great community of catalogers.

I also know that I’m lucky. On occasion, when I talk about the support I get here, other cataloging professors tell me that they don’t have that where they are, that they can never find anyone to do a guest lecture or answer a quick question about practice. I can’t imagine that. I think it would be a very unfortunate environment to be teaching in.

MD: There is also a perceived tension between the practical and the theoretical in cataloging education itself.7 Practical skills can quickly become dated, but too much of a reliance on theory places a pressure on the cataloging community to train graduates in these skills.8 How do you and your colleagues work to strike a balance between the two? Do you see this tension in other areas of library education?

AC: Regarding cataloging, see my answer(s) above. Regarding library education in general, at the UW, we’ve felt that it is better to lean too much toward theory than too much toward practice. The real leaders in the field, librarians whose names you know and who hire our graduates, tell us that is exactly what they want. They would much rather have employees who have a grounding in theory because this is the kind of grounding you need in a world that has so many changes in store. You need people who can quickly understand issues and respond to them in a positive and creative way. You can’t be creative if you are locked into a particular kind of practice, and you can’t be positive if you are afraid of the challenges that face you.

MD: Librarians and patrons are seeing a dramatic increase in electronic and continuing resources and the development of powerful search tools from outside the library (e.g. Google). What is your perception of the role of the library catalog in this ever shifting world? How can we prepare librarians and catalogers for this change?

AC: Despite alarms to the contrary, I believe that we need the library catalog, at least in the foreseeable future (which is longer than five years). Most of my friends in practice think the same. What will the catalog look like? Not the way it looks now, or it really will go away. I honestly believe that the library catalog could make users understand what absolutely cool and phenomenal things an information system could do – it could have people clamoring to Google for similar features. But, so far, I haven’t seen anything close to what I can imagine. Again, the best way to prepare librarians/catalogers for the future is to give them a good grounding in theory – in understanding why things are the way they are. I also try to teach my students to be advocates for their libraries, to demand improvements in their catalogs. Libraries pay a lot of money for these, and they should be so much better than they are.

MD: Due to a variety of factors, the role of professional catalogers in libraries is changing, with some aspects of their work undertaken by support staff or outsourced to vendors. How do you envision the current role of the professional cataloger?

AC: What I am hearing is that professional catalogers are mostly administrators these days. I am concerned when I see larger libraries without a single professional cataloger, because you need someone in the library who can make good decisions about policy and provide insightful input on local catalog design. But, I’ve been convinced that we don’t need as many professional catalogers as we have had in the past. Although we’re working in a very cooperative cataloging environment, I think we could do better. It is better to have a few people who are highly educated in cataloging and who truly understand the ramifications of what they are doing than a lot of people with poor/limited education who are providing substandard records to the community. We also need cataloging administrators who will teach their staff everything they learned in their cataloging classes so that our paraprofessionals also know how to make good cataloging decisions.

The reason we need still need cataloging education in MLIS programs is that we need people who know how to search. Good searching requires a good understanding of documents. Cataloging is what gives people that understanding. In other words, understanding cataloging is understanding the world of library resources. All librarians should have that understanding.

Our beginning cataloging course is really a course that focuses on that understanding. It is not a course that is intended to produce catalogers. Although our advanced cataloging course focuses a lot more on practice, the most effusive praise I’ve gotten about that course is from grads who went on to become reference librarians. They want advanced cataloging to be required (sooooo not possible!).

MD: If I were a student interested in metadata/cataloging, what advice would you give me?

AC: Be flexible. Be willing to move. Understand that unless you are, you may not be able to get a job in metadata or cataloging.

Take as many fieldwork credits in cataloging as you can. At least some of those credits should be in a large academic library cataloging unit, if possible, because that is where the most cataloging is still being done by professionals. Professionals will still, in general of course, be the best trainers, especially if they pass along their understanding of cataloging history and theory.

MD: In closing, let’s look at a beginning. Saye begins his article with a quote from the preface to the fourth edition of Cutter’s *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*, in which Cutter laments the passing of the “golden age of cataloging”.9 Do you think this was true in 1904 when Cutter wrote this line? Do you think this is true in 2011?

AC: I never believe stuff like this and it’s one of the only things Cutter ever wrote that make me shake my head.

Cutter couldn’t anticipate the level of global cooperative cataloging we’ve achieved. He would have loved the last 15 years, even if he hated FRBR and RDA. Little did he know that 100 years later there would still be cataloger librarians, and that cataloging would be taught at the level that it is being taught in programs like ours – still assigning his writing for our students to read because it is still among the finest thinking on cataloging ever achieved. He would, I’m sure, hate our current online catalogs as much as I do.

We will only have a golden age when we start to design innovative and elegant catalogs. This hasn’t happened yet, so how can we have ever had a golden age? Manual catalogs could not achieve the level of collocation and navigational sophistication that is possible with computerized cataloging data.

These are wonderful questions, thank you for giving me the opportunity to answer them! Notes:

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9. Saye, Jerry D. “Where Are We and How Did We Get Here? Or, The Changing Place of Cataloging in the Library and Information Science Curriculum: Causes and Consequences.” *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*  34, no.1 (2002): 119-141.