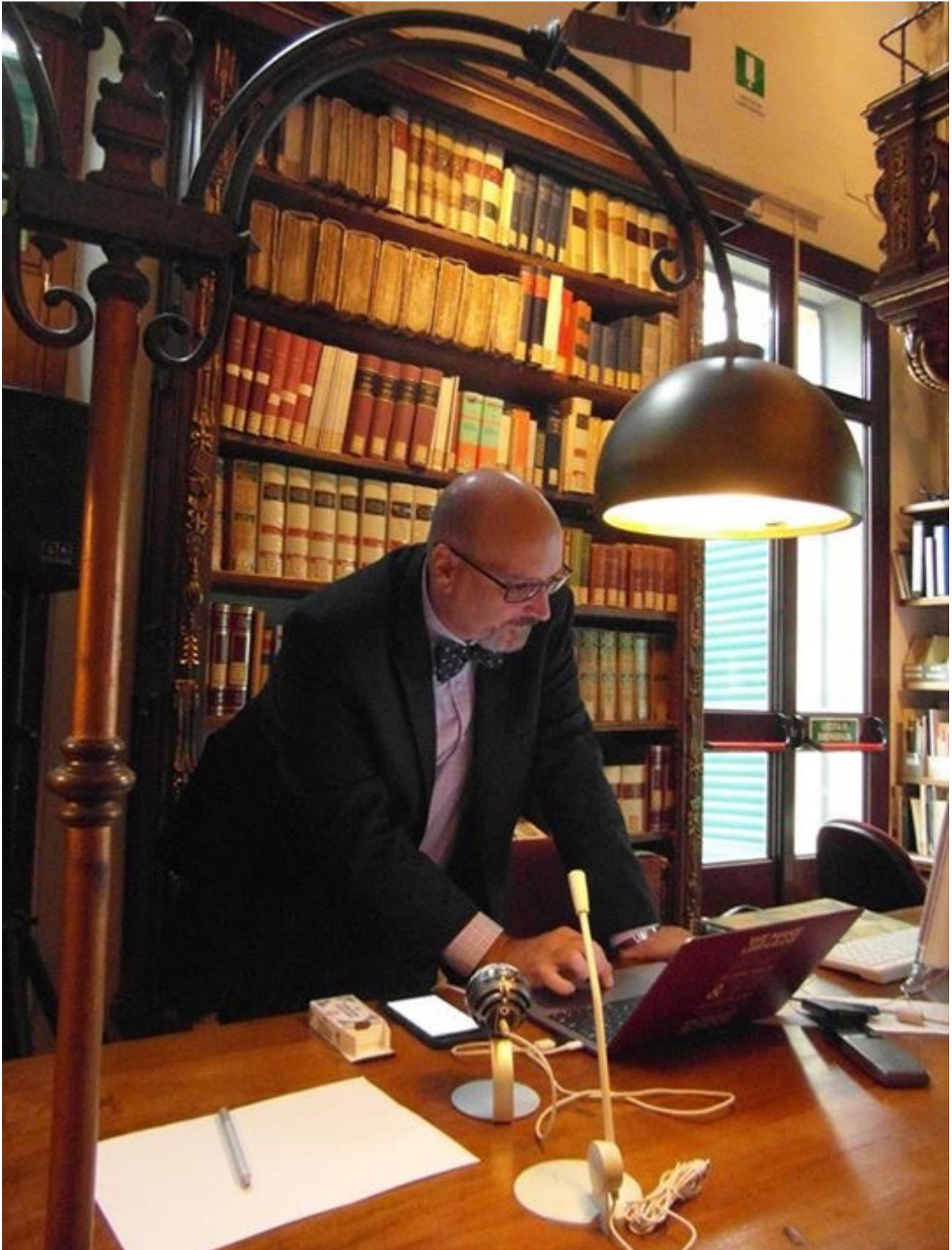


***Transforming libraries. Gabriele De Veris interviews David Lankes***



## **The professional training today requires.... ?**

A professional librarian is defined by his or her mission, the methods of achieving that mission, and the values they use to guide their work. Let me take these in turn.

The mission of a librarian is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in his or her community. That community might be a town, or a college, or a business, or a hospital. A community is a group of people that have something in common (such as where they live or study) and are part of a system for allocating scarce resources (like money or land or time). Knowledge creation is just a fancy way of saying learning. So, librarians improve society by helping communities learn. This might seem abstract, but it puts to focus on learning and people, not collections or facilities.

The second thing that defines a librarian is the methods they use to facilitate learning:

- 1) Librarians motivate people to learn and engage: Some people come to the library because they have (a student assigned to write a paper for example) to or seeking some sort of reward. This is extrinsic motivation. Some people come to the library because they want to or seek some sort of personal growth or reward. This is intrinsic motivation. A librarian needs training in how to work with each of these types of motivation. They need to understand why people are using a library.
- 2) They provide access to materials and other people: While equitable access to books and materials is a long-standing core of the professional training, it needs to be expanded. Librarians not only connect people to things (like databases or archived materials) but to other people. Librarians also help people find audiences for things the people create. So not just finding a book for a reader, but a publisher for an author. Librarians don't just house music, they stream community created music to the world.
- 3) They provide knowledge, or basic understanding of systems and resources: Librarians help their communities learn. The Internet is a useless resource for someone with no computer skills. Likewise, vital medical information is not helpful to a patient if it includes language only a doctor will understand. Librarians know how to teach and provide instruction to their communities.
- 4) Librarians build environments that make people feel safe: A library should be a safe place to explore dangerous ideas. That may be in a physical location, or online. Librarians ensure that people feel physically safe, but more importantly, intellectually safe. If a person feels like someone is watching their every read or click, they will not explore certain ideas.

The last thing that defines a librarian is their values. Librarians believe and defend transparency and openness. They believe and support lifelong learning. Librarians believe in intellectual freedom and safety, or more simply, privacy. And librarians are intellectually honest. Every person, regardless of profession, has biases and perspectives. Librarians cannot be unbiased, or neutral, but they can acknowledge this fact, and seek to serve their communities with this understanding.



**Main problems for Italian libraries are (you can add/change this list): librarians ageing; lack of money; aging librarians; poor consideration by politicians. Any solutions?**

The main problems for librarians, regardless of where, is mistaking collections and buildings for the true value of a library. Stop asking for money to add more books and start asking for money to make communities smarter. Stop seeing the library as a place where librarians do their work, and start seeing them as places the communities come to learn and make meaning in their lives. Learning and making meaning of the world is an inherently human activity. The books, buildings, and materials are tools to a larger purpose: smarter community decisions. Libraries are platforms owned and maintained by communities, but built and maintained by librarians. Money will follow value, and value in the eyes of politicians, or citizens, or professors, or students, is seeing the aspirations and vision of a community and showing how you can help achieve it. The next problem I often see librarians eager to change and advance new services, and they are stopped by communities that have an outdated notion of libraries as book palaces. We have to work to change the idea of libraries in the minds of those we serve. We must reclaim the word library as a

place of learning and scholarship, and discovery, not warehousing and holding. We have to, in the words of John Palfrey, build a new nostalgia around libraries and librarianship.

Aging of librarians is only a problem if we don't have a ready corps of activist librarians ready to take their place. If, on the other hand, you see older librarians as a problem, I take issue. Innovators and great librarians come in all ages and levels of experience. I have seen librarians in their 20s hold out of date notions of libraries, and librarians in their 70s light the world on fire.

As a community, we hold lifelong learning and diversity of views and experience as a chief asset. If we don't model that by appreciating librarians of all ages as valuable AND expecting librarians of all ages to continuously change and learn, then we are not good librarians.

Look the ultimate solution to all the problems ailing libraries is that we have disconnected our well-being and challenges from those faced by the communities we serve. If we stand apart from the people who need us, why are we surprised when they don't see value in what we do?

### **USA vs Italy: similarities and differences**

The United States libraries ignore their history, and the Italian libraries are weighed down by theirs. That is, of course, a great oversimplification. However, it does speak to a lot of misunderstanding between the two groups.

I am amazed by the wonders in the collections of Italian libraries and archives. Throughout the countryside you are constantly reminded of thousands of years of civilization. Modern city buildings stand by Roman ruins. It is natural with this constant reminder that an importance of cultural heritage and the cultural record take a prime spot. However, sometimes this leans a bit heavily on preserving the past, then ensuring the present is attended to. Further, history and culture are alive. Librarians need to be a part of constantly re-understanding and re-discovering the past to create a better future. Otherwise the past become a seemingly fragile sculpture that we are too concerned about to move, and shift in terms of perspectives and understanding.

The American, on the other hand, tend to lose their history a little too easily. We constantly re-interpret our past to meet the demands of today, often times ignoring that such an act is full of politics and biases. Americans tend to focus on growth and an assumption that whatever we develop will be better than what was – without a full examination of that past. We tend to accept technology uncritically. We are a country formed and reformed from civil revolution.

Once again these are caricatures, and really extremes on a spectrum with the truth somewhere in the middle.

I love how “Human Capital” a book compiled for Italy's hosting of the G7, put it:

“The world ‘culture’ derives from the Latin predicate *colere*, which refers directly to the art of cultivating and, in a wider sense, to the care people and communities put into cultivating themselves, their talents, their dreams.

The constant focus on the earth, and the rooting of one's identity in it, are an expression of the sacred relationship that mankind has established, since time immemorial, with Nature. The landscape is transformed into a sort of cultic map against which man measures himself, a mystical projection of his own self through the marvelous works of the universe – an experience analogous to that desire for perfection that one feels when contemplating Mother Earth”

(<http://www.g7italy.it/en/news/human-capital-a-journey-through-the-italy-of-the-g7>)

Librarians are cultivating this “mystical projection” in very tiny and enormous ways. We help people see themselves in art, science, fiction, films, and the like. However, our emphasis on either side of the ocean, must be on the people making that journey, and only secondarily upon the materials used along the way.

### **Income from services for libraries: what? when? why?**

All library services cost money. Be it in taxes, tuition, or some form of overhead payment, libraries are not free. So, then the question comes to when is it appropriate to charge additional funds at the point of service. This is a very pragmatic question to me. When does a service meet the need of a subset of our service communities that has the ability to pay to cover the cost of this special service? If the subset requiring the service is unable to pay, then the library needs to find another source of revenue, or it can't offer the service.

### **Sister cities could be a way to create a wider community, using a consolidated network with mutual exchanges?**

Libraries were one of the first peer to peer information sharing networks in the world. Such networks have transformed the profession. We should always look to link and connect services when possible.

### **One more thing (for librarians)....**

Remember that people are coming into our libraries to make meaning in their life, not to get information. That is a value that libraries have always had and will continue to have long into the future.

