Book review

Information literacy and cultural heritage: developing a model for lifelong learning
Kim Baker

Do we think about the nature of our profession and its relations with the allied professions of archivist and museum curator? Perhaps, in those first lectures in our course of professional education we did, prompted by a list of the activities of each, and perhaps we concluded that there are substantial differences in approach. Kim Baker, in this well-written and fascinating book, challenges us to think further about this certainty and also suggests that many of our assumptions about the neutrality of our professional work may be considered mistaken.

Baker is signalling that, whilst the three professions may be considered to be concerned with cultural heritage, there is by no means a shared understanding, or the use of similar approaches to providing easy and universal access to the records, media and material that constitutes our individual and collective memories. Librarians certainly have strong roles to play – but do they yet understand the issues? In an attempt at rationalising the differences and exploring the roles, this book proposes a more generic approach to the design of information literacy that assumes a convergence of museums, archives and libraries and comprehends a broader understanding of cultural heritage and how lifelong learning should be facilitated.

Chapter 1 opens with three sections that outline the context of cultural heritage in museums, archives and libraries. The concept is already familiar to most of us from within the locus of museums because there has been a lively debate, covered in news stories, about the display of artefacts, skeletal remains and other cultural material without consultation and agreement with the communities to which they belong. Baker discusses several examples of this and indicates that "cultural heritage", though simple to define, contains the implicit notion of memory, a much more contestable area. Baker then goes on to show that for the archivist and the librarian, the apparent simplicity of developing a collection consisting of a documentary heritage is illusory: cultural and political history have shaped collections, enhancing some aspects of the apparent history of peoples and repressing the memory and history of others. A careful use of post-modernistic discourse leads to the conclusion that museum curators and archivists have been considering these issues in a sustained manner for longer than librarians. It is the move towards digitisation that will, and is, encouraging librarians to apply themselves to questions such as what should be selected for digitisation and why; can such material be described using metadata from a neutral standpoint? Postmodernism has cast doubt on the possibility of the objective standpoint and, consequently, the possibility of any system of mapping, categorising and labelling ever being neutral – so, whose perspective is to be used and how can other perspectives be given equal treatment?

The second chapter considers specifically the relationship between cultural heritage and present efforts to record it in digital form. This is not an easy chapter to read quickly: its coverage of the "haves" and the "have-nots" of the digital world and the moral and ethical aspects of providing access to cultural records provide many points where one needs to put the book down and think. With the intellectual property considerations we might be on more familiar ground but, still, Baker summarises the areas of contestation and highlights the problems implicit in the current legal framework for proper treatment of cultural heritage.

There are many models for understanding Information literacy and designing interventions and programmes. Chapter 3 draws these together and provides a convenient summary of the main models, including the important aspect of approaches to measuring the impact of such programmes. Baker considers that these models may be too rigid for the often semi-structured, or unstructured, approach to information literacy that is likely to prevail in communities outside of the formal education systems. Rather, it is the path to learning outcomes that is followed in Chapter 4, where the process of lifelong learning is examined, with particular reference to developing critical thinking as an attribute of cultural engagement. The various theories of learning are explored and related to the development of a sense of cultural identity and cultural difference, with a concomitant appreciation of its richness.

Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM) is a variant on concept mapping developed by John F. Falk and others in 1998 to aid in understanding the impact of educational experiences on individual learning; it has considerable advantages in this milieu and has been used in Chapter 5 to propose and develop a generic model for lifelong learning. This has the potential to deepen our understanding of how people use and integrate such experience, by using open-ended interviews, before and after the educational experience. PMM encourages an analysis along four dimensions of Extent, Breadth, Depth and Mastery and these have a clear relationship to the inculcation of information literacy.

The next chapter proposes guidelines for adapting the model for use in local circumstances. Almost inevitably, this is the least satisfactory of the chapters: it is difficult to generate a set of generic guidelines to suit the unknown context within which the reader might want to try the model. What would aid us is a set of case studies and, to some extent, Baker does try to provide this by relating each guideline to potential circumstances, such as genealogical research. It is to be hoped that further examples and comprehensive case studies will emerge in a follow-up volume.

Chapter 7 draws the ideas together. Baker comments further on the practical application of the generic model and emphasises the opportunities presented by convergence in a period of debate and experiment with digitisation. Two appendices conclude the text: an example of a sample survey that could be used to ascertain awareness of cultural heritage and information literacy, and a schedule of how a survey could be conducted. A bibliography and index conclude the book.

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