Statement of Competency I

I. Use service concepts, principles and techniques that facilitate information access, relevance, and accuracy for individuals or groups of users

Libraries have many ways of providing users with access to information, beyond ensuring that information is organized and accessible via the use of catalogs. As part of their missions, libraries also provide services that ensure that information is understandable by the members of their service communities, and also that information is placed in context.

As entities that serve a specifically defined community – such as the population of a given city or community in the case of a public library, or students and faculty in the case of an academic library – libraries will often create programs or reference materials that highlight certain features of the collection. This can take many forms, one example of which is an event in which persons with expertise in a certain field will speak on a subject that may be of interest to the local community, and which may also take place in conjunction with an exhibit on the same subject.

While, public programs are an important means by which libraries reach out to their user communities, even more important are the ways in which libraries highlight materials that will benefit specific groups of individuals who may have specific informational needs and goals. One such way that this is done is through the creation of separate areas within the library building or website that gathers together such information or provides access to such information. An example of this is the Jobs and Careers Center at the San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library’s (SFPL’s) Main Library. This Center is located in its own space that is separate from the general reading areas, and contains books, magazines and other information for those individuals who may be looking for a new job or career, including those who are thinking of continuing their education. The website for this Center also
Jonathan Leff – Statement of Competency I

provides links to websites both inside and outside the library that provide access to a wide variety of career- and business-related information.

The collection of such links relating to a specific topic as demonstrated by the SFPL’s Jobs and Careers Center is an example of a pathfinder. Pathfinders exist for many topics and are a means by which resources can be made more accessible by locating resources on a given topic in one place. Doing so provides a starting point for users seeking information, but who are not sure where to start in their quest. While public libraries may have pathfinders such as those related to jobs and careers, the pathfinders at academic libraries focus on resources that support the institution’s curricular goals, and whose primary goal is to help students access information on specific subjects or for specific classes.

Libraries use the means described above to highlight resources that are culturally relevant to users from specific cultural and sub-groups. Public libraries have collections and exhibits that reflect the interests, needs and cultural identities of their user communities. It is fitting here to use the SFPL again as an example as it serves one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse communities in the United States. Its Main Library contains many collections reflecting its users’ diversity such as the African American Center, the Chinese Center, the Filipino American Center and the Gay & Lesbian Center. Each of these centers contains information that is relevant to the interests and history of users in question. An example of this is a bibliography of works by and about African American artists that is available on the African American Center’s website. This page for this particular bibliography also reminds users that they can find information on this subject throughout the library system, and not just at the Main Library. The New York (N.Y.) Public Library’s (NYPL’s) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is an example of a public library that has created a separate research center
that contains a wide variety of information that is of relevance to a significant and distinct segment of New York City’s population.

Libraries also provide services that allow users with special needs to gain access to information. This includes services that mail books to users who are homebound and bookmobiles that can be used by senior citizens who may not be able to get to a library branch due to limited mobility. An example of a user group for whom libraries provide such services are those users who are unable to read books due to visual impairment, and for whom libraries provide books in Braille, audio books and descriptive video, which is video with audio narration. Libraries often have centers within their facilities or distinct branches, such as the NYPL’s Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library. Many libraries also provide assistive devices that help people make use of computers, navigational aids and resources in the libraries’ collections.

Beyond creating pathfinders, or hosting special programs and exhibits, another way in which libraries contribute to the personal and intellectual enrichment of their users is through classes through which people can learn educational and vocational skills. The Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library (KCPL) hosts classes that can help users train for their General Equivalency Diploma (GED), or to learn the basics of using computers and emails, knowledge of which is necessary not only in today’s business world, but are increasingly standard features of the modern world in general. KCPL and other libraries also offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Having a free place at which one can learn life-changing and life-building skills is one of the key benefits of a public library system.

One of the most important library services that facilitates access to resources is the presence of the library website and online public access catalog (OPAC). Websites are often the first and primary point of contact that information seekers have with the resource that they hope will answer their
queries. The library is no different. A well designed library website that is logically organized with relevant links placed in prominent positions on the page will allow users to gain access to information about resources and services that the library has to offer, as well as gain access to the OPAC that contains records of the library’s holdings. Many library patrons use the website as a way of navigating these resources to find the information that is most relevant to them. Library websites also allow users the option of placing holds on materials, requesting materials from other libraries through interlibrary loan systems, and renewing materials online. The combination of these online services and capabilities allows users to plan trips to physical library facilities only as needed, as they will be better informed ahead of time about the array of library services and resources available to them.

Evidence and Criteria for Selection


   In this evidence I reviewed an article about responses of public libraries to the needs of poor and homeless persons who make use of their services. Public libraries have always been a safe space for homeless persons as they are public forums that anyone is allowed to enter regardless of social or economic status, and provide a safe shelter from inclement weather, and access to resources that many homeless users avail themselves to alleviate boredom. As recognition of the public library as a safe space for homeless persons has grown, so has the recognition of the unique information needs that this particular group of users have, such as information about social services and vocational training opportunities. Some libraries that cannot afford to build additional branches have started setting up banks of computers in local community centers in low-income neighborhoods and other underserved areas. These “e-libraries” allowed residents of these
neighborhoods to have access to library materials and resources through OPACs. In fact, libraries are often the only means by which many individuals have access to the Internet. Having Internet access allows users to set up free email accounts that can help them communicate with potential employers.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to recognize how libraries can provide services that benefit a particular group of users in ways that go beyond the “traditional” idea of a library as a storehouse of information.


This was an assignment to devise a pathfinder for a specific user group. The users for whom my group decided to create this pathfinder were people who were looking for a new job primarily due to unemployment. Our decision to gear our pathfinder to this group was based on the fact that as of the first part of 2009, the economic recession was causing increasing unemployment, and that therefore this pathfinder would be relevant to more people than usual. We divided the resources into four categories: Resume, Cover Letter, and Interview Tips, Unemployment and Hardship Resources, Psychological Resources and General Job Search Databases. We felt that each of these categories covered an important aspect of unemployment, and recognized the need that not only would unemployed persons be actively looking for new employment, but that they would also require financial and psychological support during this process. My contribution to the project was the selection of psychological resources.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to work as part of a group to develop sets of resources geared toward a particular group of users. Linking the development of this pathfinder to the
economic situation and the adverse effect that it has on library users demonstrates the recognition of the many ways that identifying sets of relevant resources can have a positive impact on library users.

Note: I received written permission from each of the members of this group to identify them by name.

3. LIBR 251 – Web Usability – Final Project

The goal of this assignment was to re-design a website based on principles of heuristics as described by Jakob Nielsen and Principles of Interaction Design as described by Bruce Tognazzini, and which are theories that guide good website design. For this project, I started with an existing website with which I was familiar, and that I thought could be redesigned for better usability. Using techniques of paper prototyping, I constructed a model of the website as I proposed to redesign it. The model was constructed using PowerPoint, which allowed me to mimic hyperlinks between pages, thus allowing for a greater degree of realism in the testing process. I tested the prototype on two neighbors and my partner, and made changes to the prototype after each round of testing for each subsequent test subject. By the end of the project I had a redesigned website that I felt was easier to navigate and use than the original.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to apply design principles and theories to improve web pages that are often the first mode of interaction that users have with libraries. A well designed website with easy-to-follow and logical links to library services and resources allows users to navigate these services and gain access to resources and information more quickly, improving the user’s library experience.
Note: I received written permission from the test subjects in this project to identify them by name.

4. LIBR 294 – Professional Experience: Internships – Authors and Literature Pathfinder

This is a pathfinder that I revised for the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library/Geschke Center. The target audience for this pathfinder is all students who need to find information about authors in general, and specific types of literature. The pathfinder provides direct links to library databases that have a variety of information such as literary journals, essays, criticism about specific forms of literature such as Nineteenth and Twentieth Century literature, poetry and the works of William Shakespeare. Where databases do not exist for these topics, users are directed to print works that are held in the library’s Reference Department. Hyperlinks to the catalog records are provided where appropriate to facilitate the finding of materials, as well as to provide more information about print materials so that users can determine whether the materials are appropriate for their needs. This pathfinder replaces the previous research guide that was last updated in 2003. A key difference between the newly revised pathfinder and the previous one is that in the new one there is a shift towards the use of online databases whereas the previous one directs users more towards print materials. The revision reflects an understanding of the need to ensure that resources are kept current and meet user expectations, which will thus increase their relevance and the likelihood that they will be used.

This evidence reflects my ability to use service principles to gather relevant resources in one place for a specific purpose and a specific audience. Being able to have access to a related set of resources on a given topic allows users a starting point from which they can further navigate library
resources, and facilitates independence in information access.

Conclusion

Libraries are service-oriented institutions as much as they are keepers of information. Libraries play a key role in providing people with access to information in a variety of forms. This is crucial not only for reasons of the opportunities for self-improvement that it provides for many users, but also for the fact that an informed public is crucial to the maintenance of a democratic society such as ours. Using service principles to ensure that users are not only aware of library services but that they also have easy and efficient access to information and resources held in library collections is a recognition on the part of libraries that the role they play is much larger and more important than merely being a “place where books are kept”. The provision of services geared to particular user groups based on their specific needs, through the development of pathfinders, programming and events, and distinct resource centers as well as the ease of access made possible through well designed websites ensures that libraries remain relevant both to long-term users and to those who have yet to set foot within their doors, be it electronically or in person.