

Personal Librarian Philosophies: Discovering Meaning in What We Do

Justin Fuhr

abstract: This article summarizes and explores personal librarian philosophies. Much like widely known teaching philosophies, librarian philosophies are statements that reflect an individual's standards and beliefs about their vocation. These statements can be used to incorporate meaning, identity, and direction into professional practice. As a form of self-reflection, personal philosophies allow librarians to delve into their professional values and give meaning to their lifework. There is little literature on personal librarian philosophies; this article describes the concept and how a librarian can develop such a philosophy.

Introduction

A satisfying and rewarding career is what many look for in their professional life. Academic librarianship provides opportunities to pursue fulfillment and to develop in many ways. But how do academic librarians approach their work? What makes librarianship purposeful and worthwhile? Where do librarians find meaning in their practice? Many academic librarians wish to define their profession, to discover shared values, and to distill what they do into a written document.

One way teaching faculty have identified and defined their instructional style is with teaching philosophies. Teaching philosophies are usually public, systematic, and critical documents that identify an individual's approach to teaching and learning, often situated in a discipline.¹ Teaching philosophies serve to identify good teaching, promote effective assessment, and encourage professional development.² In addition, since many philosophies are public, these documents circulate among their intended audience, particularly students, and make known the intentions of the instructor.³

A personal librarian philosophy, on the other hand, defines how a librarian approaches the entire vocation.

While teaching philosophies are useful for library instruction, for most academic librarians, teaching is only one part of their role. A personal librarian philosophy, on the other hand, defines how a librarian approaches the entire vocation. A librarian philosophy is a summary of an individual's professional practice and approach, and the values they infuse throughout their work. It serves as a basis for decision-making, goal setting,

and future action. Often the philosophy is a public document that helps motivate individuals to stick to what they have written.

As an early-career academic librarian, I considered how to find meaning in my work, define my identity in it, and reflect my values through it. One way to do this is with a librarian philosophy.

Librarian philosophies are not new. The literature includes discourse on defining librarianship broadly and assigning specific values as touchstones for the profession. An individual librarian philosophy differs, however, in that it is a highly personal document which gives meaning and direction to your work. Personal librarian philosophies are useful to intentionally define librarianship, identify values, describe methods of professional practice, and ultimately put meaning into an academic librarian's work.

What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?

Librarian philosophies have been discussed in the past to define the profession and to publicly share our enduring values.⁴ Historically, J. Periam Danton issued his plea for a librarian-wide philosophy,⁵ Douglas Foskett argued for a comprehensive creed for librarians,⁶ and André Cossette searched for autonomy of the profession with his philosophy.⁷

While some argued for creating a librarian philosophy, others proposed potential philosophies. In 2004, the American Library Association (ALA) published its "Core Values of Librarianship," outlining 11 essential principles: access; confidentiality and privacy; democracy; diversity; education and lifelong learning; intellectual freedom; preservation; the public good; professionalism; service; and social responsibility.⁸ One additional value, sustainability, was added in 2019. These beliefs serve many within the profession to guide their work.

In 2009, 40 librarians gathered at Darien Library in Connecticut to discuss current and future challenges of libraries. After the meeting, Cindi Trainor (Eastern Kentucky University Libraries in Richmond), John Blyberg (Darien Library), and Kathryn Greenhill (Murdoch University Library in Murdoch, Western Australia) distilled the summit's thoughts into "The Darien Statements on the Library and Librarians."⁹ In the Darien Statements, the authors propose their ideas for the purpose of the library, the role of librarians, the preservation of the library, and what members of the profession must do.¹⁰ The authors see libraries as inspirations that facilitate connections, build community, and serve as a physical space to realize creative expression. Librarians, as stewards of libraries, should trust one another and their users, engage in activism on behalf of the library, and be willing to make radical changes. Kim Leeder writes, "The document is an excellent, timeless vision of our field."¹¹



Others put forth profession-wide creeds that are succinct and to the point. R. David Lankes, in his updated guidebook *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, argues, “The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities.”¹² Lankes highlights relational aspects of the profession, believing that conversation can be a powerful tool for librarians that plays an active role in knowledge creation.

Librarian philosophies can be thought of in terms of searching for professional identity. Leeder’s 2010 article “My Maverick Bar” explores the definition of a librarian’s “real work.”¹³ Leeder finds it difficult to define this endeavor, considering a librarian’s variety of duties. She appreciates profession-wide values but finds a disconnect between these principles and her daily tasks. “There is some gap between what I stand for as a librarian,” Leeder writes, “and what I do in practice, as all idealism shrivels a bit in the face of reality.”¹⁴ In the end, for Leeder, value is more important than task, and she finds Knowledge (“with a capital ‘K’”) is the one true value for librarianship.

As a further exploration of professional identity, Emily Ford asks directly, “What do we do and why do we do it?”¹⁵ Ford brings up the complexity of navigating libraries, librarians, and librarianship, and the language used to describe the role of each. In addition, she wonders how librarians’ contributions are measured. Are they doing a good job in communicating their work to those outside the profession? What ideas do they need in place before the profession can define a philosophy? Ford urges librarians to adopt a praxis—that is, an idea translated into action—rather than a practice of librarianship. “To cultivate praxis,” Ford writes, “is to remain curious about our practice and engage with it.”¹⁶ She ends with the suggestion to read Lankes, the Darien Statements, and “Begin to reflect. Every day.”¹⁷

Despite the scholarship that considers an overarching philosophy for the entire profession, little has been written about developing personal librarian philosophies. A librarian philosophy includes an individual’s values, meaningful experiences, and approach to the field. It can be a public document that serves a dual purpose of declaration and individual accountability. These are highly personal philosophies, unique to each library worker and infused with meaning for their authors.

Although little has been written about personal librarian philosophies, scholarship provides a few examples. One is the work of Hanna Primeau, an instructional designer from The Ohio State University in Columbus.¹⁸ Primeau emphasizes teaching and the invisible work of staying abreast of relevant scholarship and technology that she contributes to her users: “What the students and faculty can’t see is the work I do behind the scene.”¹⁹ She focuses her attention on two central aspects of academic librarianship: reference and teaching. Throughout her document, Primeau mentions the advisory role that librarians play, making sure students feel confident using the library with “an expert guiding the way.”²⁰

Another example is Rich Gause, a government information librarian from the University of Central Florida in Orlando.²¹ Gause finds it important to know the strengths and weaknesses of your collection, the backgrounds and interests of your colleagues, and the concerns and practices of your profession, and to share your knowledge. He takes both a micro and a macro look at academic librarianship, encouraging librarians to know their collections inside and out, in addition to comprehending the profession. Examples he gives are knowing S. R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science and the

ideals of intellectual freedom. Above all, sharing knowledge is paramount for Gause. He argues, “The aggregate value of thousands of librarians all over the world comes when they each know their local collections well and then share that knowledge.”²² Primeau, by highlighting integral roles of academic librarians, and Gause, with his high- and low-level views of librarianship, provide exemplars to follow, modify, or use to provide inspiration for your own philosophy.

Developing a Librarian Philosophy

A librarian philosophy should be based on your personal and professional experience. Recalling Emily Ford’s question, such an ideology should identify what you do in your work, why you do it, and how you do it. Your approach will naturally reflect who you

My librarian philosophy guides action and gives meaning to those parts of my practice that I find important, ethical, and valuable.

are as a person. As I thought about what I would include in my philosophy, I contemplated past and present experiences in my personal and professional lives. My librarian philosophy guides action and gives meaning to those parts of my practice that I find important, ethical, and valuable. I linked experiences from my personal life—relationships with my family and friends; formative moments as I moved from Edmonton to Winnipeg to attend university; working thoughtfully and intentionally as modeled by

my parents and mentors—to my professional life.

I distilled this reflection into what is meaningful to me and how I approach my work. I considered how to align personal and professional values in my philosophy. First, based on community-building throughout my life, I feel strongly about developing a sense of team and camaraderie based on shared interests in academic libraries. Doing so requires working collegially, supporting my coworkers, and being empathetic. Second, as modeled by my parents, peers, and colleagues, I put my best into my work and acknowledge the work of others. Third, grounded in the importance of development and education, I have a commitment to lifelong learning to improve my practice of the profession and remain open to change. Finally, I strive to help and empower others, whether assisting the people with whom I work or users who need support.

Your own librarian philosophy will differ depending on what is meaningful for you in your work, what you value in other aspects of your life, and your approach. Some questions useful to ask when writing a librarian philosophy are:²³

- What do you do as a librarian in terms of teaching, research, and service? What is the role you play within your library?
- Think about your approach to your professional practice. Why do you work in these ways? What experiences have you had that shaped your approach?
- What short examples might you include from your work and approaches?
- What results (for example, evidence of success or impact) have you had?
- What does being a librarian mean to you?



Think about your history, current experiences, and future opportunities that may arise. Think about events from both your personal and professional lives. How might you use your background to make an impact at your place of work? Think about the skills and characteristics needed, including leadership ability, soft skills, and technical expertise, and align those with values in which you believe. Does the reason you developed your philosophy follow those beliefs? Think about whether what you say you do reflects what you actually do. As Jolene Miller, Stephanie Friree Ford, and Anna Yang write, a key is “uncovering inconsistencies in thought and action.”²⁴ Set career goals, think about how you want to act and what to prioritize in your work, and work toward those ends. Take time to reflect.

Provide context to your philosophy, including the type of library, organizational or institution mission, types of users, size, and any professional or accreditation requirements to your role. Write a rough draft of your philosophy, read it aloud, edit and proofread it, share it with a partner or colleague, and incorporate feedback.

The Reflective Librarian

A librarian philosophy is a form of reflection. As Michelle Reale suggests, reflection can be thought of as an intentional act.²⁵ In developing a librarian philosophy, you deliberately think about what you do and why you do it. You recount experiences; examine assumptions; act based on experience, either presently or in the future; and compare your actions to your philosophy. Later, your beliefs can be used to frame your work. You can think about how experiences enhance or detract from meaningful labour that is documented in your philosophy and think of actions to align yourself with your beliefs. You can heed the advice of Stephen Brookfield, “Without this habit [of reflection] we run the continual risk of making poor decisions and bad judgments.”²⁶ Reflection at any stage of your career is a valuable practice as you think about improving your work, developing your instructional style, increasing connections, and modeling collegial behavior.

Reflection at any stage of your career is a valuable practice as you think about improving your work, developing your instructional style, increasing connections, and modeling collegial behavior.

One straightforward model of reflection is Melanie Jasper’s ERA model, which stands for *experience, reflection, and action*.²⁷ I record my experiences leading library workshops in a journal using Jasper’s ERA model. For example, after a workshop, an attendee mentioned that I covered a lot of material in a one-hour session. That comment inspired me to think about how much content I introduced. I revised future sessions to present less material, offered additional examples to give context, and developed an interactive exercise for attendees.



Conclusion

Reflection is an important practice as an academic librarian. You can change your practice depending on outcomes—successes or failures—that you experience throughout your career. I believe others will find value in a personal librarian philosophy and recommend other librarians develop such a statement, use it to improve their professional practice, and think about what they do and why they do it.

I do not look to change our profession or dictate what others can or cannot do, nor to prescribe an overarching philosophy that all working in librarianship must follow. Instead, I look for guidance for myself, enabling me to do the best, most ethical work I can, and to place myself in the best professional opportunities available. My librarian philosophy helps with those goals. You can read my librarian philosophy here: <https://libguides.lib.umanitoba.ca/justinfuhr>.

You can do the same. By reflecting on experience and framing future action, you plant the seeds for a rewarding career, professional growth, and fulfilling work.

Acknowledgments

I am privileged to work with an exciting community of librarians at the University of Manitoba. I want to thank my colleagues, many of whom serve as constant sources of inspiration, imagination, and support. I especially want to thank my mentor, Mê-Linh Lê, who clarified my librarian philosophy and who models fortitude, thoughtfulness, and integrity every day.

Justin Fuhr is a liaison librarian at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada; he may be reached by e-mail at: justin.fuhr@umanitoba.ca.

Notes

1. Dieter J. Schönwetter, Laura Sokal, Marcia Friesen, and K. Lynn Taylor, "Teaching Philosophies Reconsidered: A Conceptual Model for the Development and Evaluation of Teaching Philosophy Statements," *International Journal for Academic Development* 7, 1 (2002): 83–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440210156501>.
2. Schönwetter, Sokal, Friesen, and Taylor, "Teaching Philosophies Reconsidered."
3. Schönwetter, Sokal, Friesen, and Taylor, "Teaching Philosophies Reconsidered."
4. Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: American Library Association [ALA], 2000).
5. J. Periam Danton, "Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship," *Library Quarterly* 4, 4 (1934): 527–51.
6. D. J. Foskett, *The Creed of a Librarian: No Politics, No Religion, No Morals* (London: Library Association, 1962).
7. André Cossette, *Humanism and Libraries: An Essay on the Philosophy of Librarianship*, trans. Rory Litwin (Duluth, MN: Library Juice, 2009).
8. American Library Association, "Core Values of Librarianship," 2019, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.
9. "Darien Summit on Libraries," *Library Journal* 134, 8 (2009): 12.
10. Cindi Trainor, John Blyberg, and Kathryn Greenhill, "The Darien Statements on the Library and Librarians," 2009, https://encompass.eku.edu/faculty_staff/8/.



11. Kim Leeder, "My Maverick Bar: A Search For Identity and the 'Real Work' of Librarianship," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 9, 2010, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/my-maverick-bar-a-search-for-identity-and-the-%E2%80%9Creal-work%E2%80%9D-of-librarianship/>.
12. R. David Lankes, *The New Librarianship Field Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 17.
13. Leeder, "My Maverick Bar."
14. Leeder, "My Maverick Bar."
15. Emily Ford, "What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?" *In The Library With The Lead Pipe*, August 8, 2012, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/what-do-we-do-and-why-do-we-do-it/>.
16. Ford, "What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?"
17. Ford, "What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?"
18. Hanna Primeau, "Philosophies of Librarianship," *Librarian Yarns* (blog), <https://www.librarianyarns.com/philosophy>.
19. Primeau, "Philosophies of Librarianship."
20. Primeau, "Philosophies of Librarianship."
21. Rich Gause, "Philosophy of Librarianship," University of Central Florida Libraries, 2021, <https://guides.ucf.edu/c.php?g=78510&p=505475>.
22. Gause, "Philosophy of Librarianship."
23. Adapted from Betsy Keating and Margaret Clow Bohan, "Creating a Teaching Dossier Workshop," PowerPoint presentation, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Workshop in Library Use, June 21, 2021.
24. Jolene M. Miller, Stephanie Friree Ford, and Anna Yang, "Elevation through Reflection: Closing the Circle to Improve Librarianship," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 108, 3 (2020): 354, <https://jmla.pitt.edu/ojs/jmla/article/view/938>.
25. Michelle Reale, *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher: Strategies for Mindful Academic Practice* (Chicago: ALA, 2016).
26. Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 3.
27. Melanie Jasper, *Beginning Reflective Practice* (Andover: Cengage Learning, 2013).

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication. Portal 23.2.

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 23.2.