Finding the skills for tomorrow: Information literacy and museum information professionals

Paul F. Marty*

College of Information, Florida State University, 240 Louis Shores Building, Tallahassee FL 32306 2100, USA

Abstract

This paper presents results from 21 semi-structured interviews with museum information professionals who were asked about their experiences working with information resources, tools, and technologies in museums. The interviews were analyzed to develop an understanding of the information literacy skills of museum information professionals. This paper presents the results of this analysis, and discusses the state of information literacy in museums, and the increasing need for museum information professionals to possess information literacy skills. The results illustrate how information literacy is defined by information professionals in museums, and how perceptions of information literacy and its importance to museums have changed over time.
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1. Introduction

Museum professionals work with a variety of information resources, from museum collections, to information about collections, to information about the contexts in which collections are displayed, studied, or interpreted. The ability to manipulate and manage information resources has long been an important skill for museum professionals (Lord & Lord, 1997; Orna & Pettitt, 1998; Washburn, 1984). Recently, changing ideas about the museum's position as an information service organization have prompted new questions about the role of information professionals in museums (cf. Cannon-Brookes, 1992;

*Tel.: +1 850 644 5133; fax: +1 850 644 6253.

E-mail address: marty@ci.fsu.edu.

Giannini, 2006; Grant, 2001; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; MacDonald, 1991; Marty, 2004b; Roberts, 2001). These questions are driven in part by the changing needs of museum visitors, both in-house and online, whose expectations about increased access to museum information resources may pose difficult challenges for museum professionals (Cameron, 2003; Hamma, 2004a; Knell, 2003; Rayward, 1998).

To meet the constantly changing information needs of the users of museum resources, a new type of museum professional has evolved, one whose interests lie in managing the unique information resources found in the museum environment (cf. Hamma, 2004b; Hermann, 1997; Marty, 2004b). Over the past several years, the author of this paper has been studying information professionals in museums, examining their roles and responsibilities (Marty, 2006), their educational backgrounds and career paths (Marty, 2005), and the changing nature of their work in museums (Marty, 2007). These studies leave no doubt that information literacy skills, broadly defined, are extremely important for museum information professionals to possess (cf. White, 2004).

Despite the importance of information literacy for museums, little is known about how museum information professionals view, define, or evaluate information literacy skills. This lack of knowledge is supported by the findings of other researchers, who argue that information professionals in museums are among the least studied of all consumers and producers of museum resources (Gilliland-Swetland & White, 2004). The goal of this paper is to improve the overall understanding of information literacy skills of museum information professionals, as well as the changing perceptions of information literacy and its importance in museums.

2. Literature review

Information literacy, as defined by the American Library Association (ALA), refers to the ability to "recognize when information is needed and […] to locate, evaluate, and use it effectively" (American Library Association, 1989). In the years since the ALA formulated this definition, researchers have explored the importance of information literacy skills in various environments, including the home (Rieh, 2004), corporate research laboratories (Hirsh & Dinkelacker, 2004), and educational institutions (Fidel, 1999; Leckie & Fullerton, 1999; Whitmire, 2003). Others have analyzed the different approaches from which information literacy can be explored as a theoretical concept, including emphasizing learning and sociotechnical fluency (Marcum, 2002) and considering information literacy within "a complex system of social relationships, sociotechnical configurations, and work organization" (Tuominen, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005, p. 329). According to Rader (2002), more than 5000 works on information literacy have been published since 1973, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review information literacy as a topic (for a recent overview, see Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer, 2004). The degree to which information literacy has been studied in general makes all the more noticeable the lack of comprehensive studies of museum information professionals and their information literacy skills.

Defining museum information professionals can be challenging, in part because their responsibilities have evolved along with the changing roles of museums in the information society (see Marty, 2006, for a detailed examination of this problem that explores the different profiles of information professionals working in museums). The difficulties of defining museum information professionals are exacerbated by the fact that most museum professionals can be considered information professionals in some sense, as