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Trigger's cataloguer: professional development by default

Rachel Playforth

Trigger's cataloguer is my version of a philosophical problem known as Trigger's Broom (or more classically, the Ship of Theseus). Trigger, as fans of eighties situation comedy will surely know, is a character in *Only Fools and Horses* who works as a street sweeper. He once claimed to have had the same broom for 20 years, although it had gone through 17 new heads and 14 new handles. The philosophical question is: can something that's had all its original parts replaced still be thought of as the same object? So in terms of professional identity, can I still be considered a cataloguer if I'm not doing any cataloguing? And what if I AM cataloguing, but I'm called something else altogether? When I used the High Visibility Cataloguing blog to look into our evolving job titles, as well as what we actually do, it was clear that many of us are having the heads and handles of our cataloguing brooms gradually replaced.



In my own case, I started at the British Library for Development Studies nearly four years ago as a cataloguer, but have moved into the role of repository coordinator. This involves managing a digitisation project with international partners and launching our own institutional repository. So does a role change always involve wholesale reinvention, or could I bring my cataloguing skills with me? Cataloguing for me has always been about increasing access, and full-text repositories are part of that same goal, so although I'm doing a lot less traditional cataloguing there is an obvious overlap in the skills required. I'm still using my cataloguing expertise to describe items and make them more accessible.

However, putting my skills into a new context where I was managing not just metadata, but people as well, did involve what you might call professional development by default. Here are a few of the lessons I've learned (the hard way) about managing change and juggling roles:

1. First, catch your expert

When faced with a new area of work, I ask myself four questions:

- 1) who else is doing this?
- 2) are they doing it better?
- 3) can they teach me?
- 4) can they do it instead?

Although you might be doing a wider range of tasks, you can't possibly become an expert in every area. A good use of time is probably to find out who IS an expert in these areas, either in your workplace or elsewhere, and try to make use of their expertise. We often don't get formal training when our job changes, especially if it's a gradual change, but there are lots of formal and informal networks out there which you can call on for help. It's even worth asking the question, should I be doing this at all? Duplication of effort is common in large organisations, so make sure with every project that you're not reinventing the wheel.

2. Stay in control

Be strategic about taking on new responsibilities. Even when it feels like things are just being thrown at you, you have a choice about how to react. Work out how (and if) a role change would benefit you in the short and long term and let you follow your interests. But do be open-minded and prepared to find a new passion.

3. Do less with less

Much as we're always asked to, you can't do more with less. It's more a question of making the less better - quality rather than quantity. So my first tip is an obvious one: say no. But not just to the things you don't want to do; sometimes you should also say no to things you DO want to do, which is much harder. Make sure you have a clear job description so you feel comfortable about turning people down, too. Managing information overload and social media as well as formal obligations can be tricky – the active library blogosphere and Twitter community give us glimpses into a multitude of new ideas, developments and events, and offer the illusion of keeping on top of it all with lists, digests and RSS feeds. But it is an illusion. A narrower focus isn't going to make you a bad librarian, and sometimes it's better not to know what you're missing. Even a small amount of judicious unsubscribing and unfollowing can make a difference – ignorance can be bliss!

4. The myth of time management

You can't manage time. You especially can't make more of it, no matter how organised you are. What you can do is manage yourself, and other people's expectations. A really useful approach when you're trying to work out when and if you can deliver something is to remember the difference between effort and duration. A task may involve seven hours' worth of effort but if you have a full day of meetings and then a day's leave before you can start it, you need to budget three days to do it, and tell other people that that's how long it will take. (This is especially important for part-time workers.)

5. People vs cataloguing

I'm being reductive here but cataloguing is essentially a linear process - something is not catalogued, we follow some steps, then it is. Collaborative work is subject to a lot more iterations, delays, conflicts and shades of grey; there's no single point in my repository project where I can say 'that relationship has been successfully managed'. Other people always have an agenda, and their goal for the project may not be quite the same as mine. It's also undeniably scary taking on a new role in a new area of work. A useful mindset to get into is one where you believe that nobody wants you to fail (because after all, why would they – it very rarely benefits people when their co-workers and project partners are failing!) This is also known as 'reverse paranoia'. The more reverse paranoid we can be, the more we'll be able to develop as cataloguers, and beyond...