Information Mavens in Southeast Asia: The Need for Collaboration and Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

The following paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of programs in Southeast Asia that focus on intra-national, regional, and international collaboration efforts and continuing professional development activities. The opportunities and threats to such programs are analyzed as well as their successful and unsuccessful strategies. The author provides a list of personal recommendations for success drawing on proven methods utilized elsewhere. Though the primary focus is on library professionals in Southeast Asian Countries ((Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Brunei) some attention is paid to other Asian countries (China and India), as well as two African nations (Uganda and Kenya), and the United States. The conclusion of the paper couches the necessity of collaboration and continuing professional development as an integral part of a librarian’s education after graduation and calls for greater efforts to be made in achieving the success of such programs.
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Due to the changing nature of global information dynamics—the ascending supremacy of technology as a conduit for data, the collapse of xenophobic barriers, and the librarian’s title evolution to information professional—the librarian’s role is expanding while their professional knowledge falls short. There is a theory that information has emerged as the “fourth resource” after land, labor, and capital (Kavulya, 2007, p. 211). Yet some librarians do not possess enough information—or education—to be competent professionals. S.R. Ranganathan, a leading librarian in India, is quoted as saying that there is a “near famine in professionally qualified library manpower” (Ranganathan, 1957, as cited in Sharma, 2005, p. 81). While in China, “[a]nybody can be a librarian whether he or she is professionally trained or not” (Wu, 2004, p. 70). In the two articles analyzed in this paper one deals with the need for continued professional development (CPD) for librarians in Southeast Asia (SEA) while the other addresses the need for collaboration between different countries in SEA to increase the knowledge base of all librarians within the region.

Collaboration and Continuing Professional Development: SWOTs

Turning first to the issue of collaboration, the article describes strengths in SEA as including: established regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a web portal created for LIS Education in Asia (LISEA), the expansion of programs in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand that have included new subject areas in knowledge management, information systems, digital information, and new media. On the flip side, weaknesses to collaboration include: spotty ICT infrastructure in some countries, linguistic differences, no regional accreditation process,
and copyright issues for sharing information on LISEA. These weaknesses combine to point out some threats: weak LIS programs, limited ability to enter global LIS conversations, and a low level of respect for information professionals in some countries is compounded by the high numbers of non-professional librarians without formal training (Chin Chuan & Foo, 2002, np.). However, the strengths listed above offer further opportunities for success. Through LISEA, ASEAN, and other regional programs such as the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL), fellowships of librarians are offered opportunities to enter into conversations with one another. Conferences, web portals, workshops, and joint committees will continue the professional development of librarians in the region and, at the same time, further their collaborative efforts (Chaudhry, 2007, pp. 25-30).

The second article on CPD for librarians lists strengths as: universities that allow professionals to audit courses for updating knowledge, multiple degree programs at a wide variety of schools in different countries, qualified instructors at the schools, and a plethora of CPDs offered by various schools in the region. Weaknesses include: CPDs as a peripheral responsibility in most schools, lack of properly trained educators in emerging fields, unavailability of some resources (literature, hardware, software, IT infrastructure, etc), most CPDs offered primarily in Singapore, low-tech, minimal methods for attracting attention to CPDs, and unstructured, uncoordinated CPD offerings. Threats to CPDs come from the low opinion of librarians, the sustainability of libraries in an increasingly digital age, and limited resources to produce CPDs and to attract participants—in this case, money is a defining factor which is necessary to produce a program and to offer travel stipends for attendees. Opportunities for successful CPDs are inherent in every
interaction between librarians and the simplest way of furthering one’s professional acumen is communication with other like-minded individuals—even a simple conversation or email could count. Furthering marketing efforts to advertise when an organization is putting on a CPD is an opportunity in the wings waiting to happen. Finally, collaboration between LIS schools internally within nations but also externally throughout SEA would be helpful in producing coordinated offerings while sharing the responsibility for producing them (Majid, 2004, pp. 58-69).

**SWOT Solutions: Plans and Expectations**

In regards to the efforts made to deal with the SWOTs in collaboration, several plans were put into effect whose expected outcome was a furtherance of the collaborative ties between nations in SEA. The two projects described in the article include: “improving the quality of education programs through regional schemes of accreditation and sharing of teaching materials by building repositories of learning objects” (Chaudhry, pp. 25-26). As of yet, nothing has come of the regional accreditation scheme (p. 26). As stated in the SWOTs, another plan was the creation of LISEA and according to the article this was successful up to a point. However, some of the material has copyright issues, not all of the information can be harvested from websites, and building a network of willing contributors in the profession is a lengthy process that continues even now (Chaudhry, pp. 25-30).

The expected outcome described in the article on CPD is well-educated professionals that are able to offer competent job related services. The article states that the MLIS degree should be considered “an appetizer, whereas, CPD programs take care of the complete nutritional (educational) needs of a professional” (Majid, p. 60). The strategies
espoused by the article to deal with CPDs is to advocate collaboration between LIS schools, enhance the usefulness of activities, increase the marketability, and imploring LIS schools to consider CPD activities as a core responsibility and not an ad hoc one (Majid, pp. 58-69). My impression is that these strategies have not been fully realized. Though some confirmation of success can be seen in reports on conferences held in Asia such as the International Conference of Asian Digital Libraries convened annually in rotating Asian cities since 1998. The 2001 conference, for example, attracted over 600 attendees from 18 countries across four continents (Allard & Fox, 2002, np.). On the other hand, Bangladesh, in South Asia could not even conceive of implementing digital libraries as late as 2006. Poor ICT infrastructure and lack of funding in this country as well as a host of others in SEA heavily limit their ability to join the digital age (Islam & Rahman, 2006, p. 143). Though in comparison, Thailand has 26 Internet service providers (Siriwongworawat, 2003, p. 39). However, CPDs relying on internet access would still be virtually unavailable to many countries in SEA.

Suggestions for Success: Author Initiatives

An important problem facing the development of librarians in SEA is their social standing within their own countries, “This trend may have been caused by a relatively low recognition of LIS professionals in East Asian countries as well as a lack of professionalism on the part of librarians in the region” (Miwa, p. 177). In order to rectify this problem, librarians must take part in CPDs (collaborative or otherwise) to resist stagnation within their jobs and increase their professionalism. Also, LIS schools must take responsibility for producing competent graduates with respected credentials.
An example of existing training modules which can be used as a CPD in SEA countries are those produced by UNESCO. One very useful one which could be utilized by many countries in the region is a training package on Information and Communication Technology. It can be downloaded from the internet or is available on CD-ROM for free (Ornager, 2003, pp. 109-112).

Exchange programs with more developed nations benefit both parties. One successful example occurred between Makerere University Libraries (MUL) in Uganda and the University of Tennessee Libraries (UTL) in the US. The two library systems cooperated to train MUL staff and develop an Electronic Document Delivery Service between UTL and MUL (Atkins, Smith, & Dewey, 2005, pp. 192-96).

Marketing initiatives are imperative for highlighting both LIS activities as well as the important role of a library in its societal context. Marketing positioning strategies reflect the research that goes into defining the market and how a service will differ and compete with rivals in the sector (Brooksbank, 1994, p. 10). LIS schools, organizations, and regional associations don’t have to compete with one another to offer services to their market—they must collaborate in order to develop relevant programs. Libraries also need to learn to market themselves and their staff in order to increase social standing; “not to increase profit, but to increase in user satisfaction” (Gupta, 2003, p. 97).

Summary

This paper describes efforts in SEA to develop collaborative programs and the CPD offerings available to nations in the region. The SWOTs in two articles are described, assessed, and evaluated. Finally examples from other regions are offered as well as
authorial suggestions for implementation to further the efforts of library professionals in the region.

**Conclusion**

It would not be far off to say that the end result expected from collaboration and CPDs is an increase in the education of library professionals. Concurrent with their personal development comes a more positive image of their activities and an elevation of their host institutions. After a number of initiatives at the Shanghai Library in China, staff morale was high and in the words of three library administrators, “staff say that they are glorious because the library is glorious, and they will all do their best to win glory for the library” (Wang, Wu, & Wu, 2000, p. 407). This attitude is the right one to apply across Southeast Asia. Through CPD activities and collaboration, librarians will be able to increase their professional glory and refract that glory throughout their libraries.
References


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