

The Social Justice Framework in the Information Technology Rural Librarian Master's Scholarship Program: Bridging the Rural Digital Divides

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Abstract: This paper applies a social justice framework to reflect on the experiences in the Information Technology Rural Librarian Master's Scholarship Program (ITRL) that has recently been funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to the School of Information Sciences (SIS) at the University of Tennessee (UT). ITRL's purpose is to recruit and train sixteen paraprofessionals working in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) rural libraries to complete their master's degree part-time from June 2010 – August 2012 in the UT's SIS synchronous distance education program.

Keywords: social justice, Information Technology Rural Librarian Master's Scholarship Program, ITRL.

1. Introduction

This paper applies a social justice framework to reflect on the experiences in the Information Technology Rural Librarian Master's Scholarship Program (ITRL) that has recently been funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to the School of Information Sciences (SIS) at the University of Tennessee (UT). The ITRL's purpose is to recruit and train sixteen paraprofessionals working in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) rural libraries to complete their master's degree part-time from June 2010 – August 2012 in the UT's SIS synchronous distance education program. The grant combines work experience in regional libraries with graduate instruction and a curriculum that focuses on information technology

(IT) and rural librarianship (Mehra et al., 2010). For the ITRL curriculum design, see URL: http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl/course_requirements. Currently, while working at a distance in the SCA rural libraries, the ITRL students are receiving a semi-structured, individually-tailored curriculum that allows them to develop IT and rural management deliverables in their course assignments that are expected to be useful and directly applied to the local contexts of their rural libraries and communities (Black, Mehra, & Singh, 2011).

The ITRL makes connections between research-teaching-service practices in the American academy towards social justice results and outcomes. This paper highlights this social justice angle involving the development of IT and management product integration achieved during the ITRL educational process in rural library contexts (Mehra et al., 2012). It adopts a framework consisting of social justice elements and principles that was presented as a short paper/poster during the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science & Technology 2006 (Information Realities: Shaping the Digital Future For All) (Mehra, Albright, & Rioux, 2006). Applying the social justice framework to the ITRL identifies underlying motivations that are shaping its conceptualization and implementation to address the rural digital divides experienced in the SCA region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2004; Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011a; Mehra, Singh, & Parris, 2010; Oden, Strover, Inagaki, & Lucas, 2004). It also highlights how integration of teaching, research, and service missions in library and information science (LIS) can be used to achieve social justice agendas that promote community building and community development in traditionally underserved and marginalized areas (e.g., rural environments in the SCA region) (Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011b).

2. Social Justice Elements in the ITRL

Table 1 analyzes the ITRL in the context of the following social justice elements:

- An underserved population that comprises of a group (or individuals) experiencing some form of inequity in access to information, resources, technology, power/prestige, etc.
- An information need which is presented in terms of gaps between existing and desired levels of expectations in access to information, resources, technology, power/prestige etc. with the aim to identify possible service plan(s) to bridge these gaps.
- Methodologies that are the research approaches used in engaging with the population(s).
- Outcomes defined as the impacts or the tangible and intangible changes that have (or may) occur in the lives of the stakeholders before and after getting involved in the project.

- Assessment/evaluation that explores if the original need that motivated the interaction got addressed. It examines the effectiveness of the strategies adopted to address the original issue.

Sr. No.	Element	Representation in the ITRL
1.	Population	Rural librarians and rural communities in the Southern and Central Appalachia.
2.	Information need	Lack of access to information and communication technologies; Limited rural management skills/training; Lack of human resources, computers, hardware/software infrastructure; Limited knowledge and information resources; Gaps in LIS educational/professional competencies.
3.	Research methodology	Mixed approaches: Quantitative and qualitative; Participatory action research.
4.	Achievement of outcomes	Sixteen rural librarians with a master's degree; Development of an LIS curriculum tailored to meet the needs of rural librarians; Information technology deliverables and rural management products that can be used in rural SCA regions.
5.	Assessment & evaluation	Formative and summative; Ongoing and continuous; Participatory evaluation.

Table 1: Social justice elements in the ITRL.

3. Social Justice Principles in the ITRL

Table 2 represents the following social justice principles in the ITRL:

- Fairness and equity in social relationships that reflect how the program makes various experiences more equitable for specific underserved individuals or populations.
- Empowerment that addresses how the ITRL is changing the ways social conditions were before and after the interaction for different individuals. It identifies changes in the perceptions of individuals about their role in determining the course of their lives as a result of program participation.
- Economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental impacts which describe how the interaction is changing the ways things are at these levels before and after the interaction.
- Community building and community development that call attention to any equitable partnerships and collaborations in the program with local, national, and international communities to promote social equity and social

justice for individual, social, and community empowerment of the disenfranchised.

- Diversity, multiplicity, and democracy involve varied participation in decision-making.
- Everyday information needs of the disenfranchised are examined in the context of stakeholder involvement in the program.
- Community informatics that explores the role of information and communication technologies to empower and enable local and global communities to meet their goals and aspirations.

Sr. No.	Principle	Representation in the ITRL
1.	Fairness and equity in social relationships	Rural libraries and the SCA region are both underserved in the profession with respect to professional LIS education (Hildreth, 2007). The SCA region is lagging behind national trends in terms of IT and rural management development.
2.	Empowerment	ITRL students develop self-identified IT and rural management deliverables that are most relevant in their SCA libraries and communities.
3.	Economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental impacts	ITRL goal is to train and educate SCA paraprofessionals in IT and rural management skills so that they can provide better information support services in rural libraries that promote community-wide development and progressive outcomes at these levels.
4.	Community building and community development	Collaborations and partnerships with SCA state librarians, regional library networks, public libraries, and community members, amongst others, are promoting strategic planning and implementation in rural libraries and developing IT and rural management outcomes that make a difference in the lives of people in the SCA regions.
5.	Diversity, multiplicity, and democracy	Recruiting paraprofessionals already working in SCA rural libraries; ITRL students are using their experiences in SCA rural libraries to shape their educational journey in ways that have maximum impact on local community development.

6.	Everyday information needs	ITRL students are developing IT and rural management deliverables that are improving ways to meet everyday information needs.
7.	Community informatics	Information and communication technologies are being developed in the ITRL by the students to empower and enable local communities to participate more fully in the globalized information networked society.

Table 2: Social justice principles in the ITRL.

4. Social Justice Outcomes

Social justice elements (discussed in section 2) provide a framework for developing social justice projects and possibilities in LIS that extend the professions beyond traditional roles as mere service providers (Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2010). Rural librarians are developing IT and management resources and outcomes in their ITRL courses while integrating social justice principles to potentially achieve greater community-wide impacts and progressive changes in the SCA region. ITRL students are also learning to apply theory and concepts in real-world contexts while developing products that have practical relevance to their SCA work and community environments. For ITRL deliverables created by SCA rural librarians in their UT SIS courses see URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl-program-deliverables>.

For succeeding in such efforts during their LIS education, SCA rural librarians are adopting philosophies and practices that help them collaborate and partner with various community-based agencies, organizations, and institutions. For more information, see the ITRL student profiles at URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl-students>. They are also learning to engage with their patrons/users/customers as equals who play an intrinsic role in such collaborations to insure the effectiveness of the library service provision process. It is leading to the development of outcomes in the ITRL courses that are more meaningful to local communities and individuals. ITRL students, thus, play a greater role in getting the public more involved in this process of collaboration, educating them about the role of libraries in their everyday lives, and helping them develop a personalized ownership relationship to the library and its services/resources being developed.

5. Conclusions

ITRL students are developing IT and rural management products in their coursework that are helping to bridge gaps in the SCA region to tackle lagging IT literacy in the rural SCA communities (Mehra, Black, & Lee, 2010; Scruggs, 2010; Shaw, Chen, Harris, and Huang, 2009). Even though the ITRL is an educational program, this paper summarizes social justice research involving IT

and management product integration in rural library contexts. IT deliverables applied towards rural libraries in the ITRL courses include: technology planning, assessment, and analysis; database and web design, development, and usability; building digital libraries, web portals, and Library 2.0 tools; establishing hardware and software configurations for networking systems. Management outcomes in the ITRL rural library courses include: service evaluation and assessment in rural libraries; planning and management of a rural library program for youth and adults; reader's advisory and other information services; grant writing and partnership development. Local, regional, and national collaborations and networking have played a significant role in generating community-wide participation and support to achieve socially relevant outcomes (Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011c). Summarizing the ITRL in terms of social justice elements and principles provides one strategy to highlight its outcome-driven component that may encourage consideration of the social justice agenda within mainstream LIS research, education, discourse, and practice. Future publications will report on follow-up developments in the ITRL.

5. Acknowledgements

We appreciate the recently funded IMLS grant that is supporting the ITRL activities reported in this paper. We gratefully acknowledge the generous contributions of the SCA's rural librarians and others who have participated in the various ITRL's activities. The authors want to commend the ITRL students in their leadership, dedication, and hard work involved in pursuing a master's degree while working full-time in the SCA rural libraries to make a difference in their marginalizing circumstances experienced in the rural SCA regions. A word of appreciation to Dr. Kevin Rioux and Dr. Kendra S. Albright in their collaboration to develop the social justice framework presented during the ASIS&T 2006 Annual Conference that is applied in this paper in the context of the ITRL.

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