An Academic Librarian in the Expanding Universe of Knowledge

Professorial Lecture of Magda El-Sherbini
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As some of you probably know, I was born in the land of Hatshepsut, the first queen of Egypt, (Slide 2) and although it took a long time for me to discover her importance in my life, I of course knew her from history.

I became better acquainted with the story of Hatshepsut during my visit to Upper Egypt on a Fulbright grant in 2011. In Luxor I had the opportunity to visit the tomb of this female ruler of Ancient Egypt who left such a great impression on her country and on me personally.

When I learned about her life and rise to power, I was inspired by her determination and strength. Under her leadership, the country flourished and she is known for building magnificent temples. She grasped the opportunity to rule when it presented itself and this is one characteristic that I admire.

I would like to claim that my life and career were as spectacular as hers, but this would be a bit of a stretch. After completing my MLS at Catholic University in Washington DC I returned to Egypt and was offered a position at the School of Library and Information Science at Cairo University-Helwan Branch to teach cataloging. What a way to begin a library career!

At that time, I had no experience teaching or cataloging for that matter. After teaching a few sessions I submitted my resignation and ran away. I had no
confidence in my teaching skills and could not cope with 70 undergraduate faces staring at me every morning. This was a great disappointment to my mentors and to myself.

As I walked home that day I thought about my future in libraries. My dreams were always extraordinary, and at that moment in my life, my dreams were truly fantastic. They had to do with the Library of Congress and Big Ben, the clock on the tower of the Parliament Building in London. Why these two? - I will return to them in a moment. Fast forward to 2015, and here I am, standing in front of you delivering my professorial lecture. Some of you might ask: what happened in those thirty years?

Well, what happened was my return to America, coming to OSU, years of growth and gaining new experience. The tenure system gave me the opportunity to teach, to conduct research and publish. This was also an opportunity to participate in conferences, interact within the profession and gain valuable experience in the process.

Teaching in libraries can mean different things. For catalogers, it usually means providing access to information by creating accurate and detailed catalog records. At the manager’s level, it can also mean long term planning, setting goals, creating documentation and overall management. Through the years, I managed to combine most of these activities with research and service.

But, somewhere along the way I recognized the need to share my knowledge and experience with others. It started innocently with giving library tours. It then grew into in-house training of library staff. As I gradually moved into offering workshops, I noticed that I really enjoyed the open interaction with my students. One thing led to another, and I was invited as a guest lecturer at the Kent State University’s School of Library and Information Science. And I liked it. I enjoyed teaching. In fact it became an addiction of sorts.
You can see where I am going with this. After running away from teaching in Egypt years ago, I was now getting deeper and deeper into it. Since then, I have been teaching at Kent, offering on-line courses, freshman seminars at OSU and all sorts of library workshops.

The knowledge and experience gained through all these activities has given me a different perspective on academic librarianship. As librarians, we face many questions about our role on the university campus and in the academic community. We share ideas among ourselves and work hard on solving technical problems. Sometimes, as we focus our attention on internal operations of the library, and concentrate on solving the important day-to-day problems, we can lose sight of the broader currents in the information world in which we operate. I think that at such moments it is important to take a step back and look around. And this is what I have been trying to do.

Two years ago (Slide 3) I was fortunate to participate in the European Conference on Data Analysis in Luxembourg. In addition to presenting my own paper on multi-lingual subject access, I had a chance to listen to presentations by scientists from across a variety of academic disciplines.

The presentations dealt with data analysis and data mining, and as I listened to the lectures, I began to see clearly how the libraries operate as part of a larger information community. I also perceived the benefits of us stepping out of our insular environment into the broader information world. I realized that we have a lot to learn and equally much to offer.

Perhaps this is common knowledge, but it occurred to me that we would do well to go beyond interacting among ourselves and to participate in the broader discussions. This was the first time I had a chance to see the information world from a different perspective. And I liked what I saw. We librarians have a role to
play. What I brought to the table that day was of great interest to the librarians and the scientist alike.

For the last three years I have been serving on Fulbright’s review process committee. My job was to review dozens of Fulbright applications from across all academic disciplines, and make recommendations. Although I am not an expert in oceanography, agriculture or industrial engineering, my library credentials and research experience allowed me to participate in discussions regarding the merits of the applications. This experience gave me a new perspective on the activities of the broader academic community, their research needs and methods they use. I could learn from this experience and bring it back to the library.

My Fulbright experience is now bearing fruit at OSU. I have been appointed to serve on the OSU Fulbright Council by the Office of International Affairs. My role there is to council students and faculty in their application process. This is an exciting aspect of what can be termed as “teaching”.

People frequently ask me how a cataloger can become involved in so many activities that seem to go far beyond what is considered traditional cataloging. I think the answer lies in attitude and being open to opportunities and ideas when they presented themselves. As I progressed through library ranks, I remained flexible and eager to learn and share. I interpret the title of “professor” in its broadest meaning and recognize the importance of the mission.

Now, back to the beginning.

The first draft of this lecture had a working title (Slide 4) – it was Hatshepsut, Big Ben and the Library of Congress. Now I will try to explain all of this.
Hatshepsut was the first female ruler of the ancient Egyptian empire. (Slide 5) She is regarded by Egyptologists as one of the most successful pharaohs, reigning longer than any other woman of an indigenous Egyptian dynasty. She is also known as “the first great woman in history of whom we are informed.” I felt that she could serve as a model for me personally and for all women in leadership positions today. Just as she did, we can make a difference and transform our world. We can reach beyond our limitations, our immediate surroundings, our desk, office, building or campus, to influence events. To make a difference. This is the reason I selected a book about her life to be added to the library’s collection.

Last summer, at the end of another conference, as I was strolling along the banks of the river Thames, (Slide 6) I found myself at the foot of an ancient Egyptian obelisk. (Slide 7) What a surprise! Did Hatshepsut come to London before me? I later learned that the British brought the obelisk from Luxor during the XIX century. It is popularly called “Cleopatra’s needle”, but it is closer in age to Hatshepsut’s time.

The obelisk is not far from the British Parliament building and Big Ben.

Cairo University has a large clock which chimes every hour to mark the passing time. (Slide 8) Egyptian students, who always have a great sense of humor, nicknamed it - “the Big Ben”. As a young student, I often heard the chiming clock, I wondered about London, the real clock and always imagined being there. I dreamed about seeing it, but in reality, London for me was about as attainable as the planet Mars. But, finally last summer I was invited to a conference in England and there it was. Among the first thing I saw was the Big Ben. (Slide 9)

This leaves the third element from the original title of my lecture – the Library of Congress. As a young cataloger at Cairo University, (Slide 10) I processed the LC
cards that arrived there each month and wondered how such perfect cards were produced, who made them and how it was done.

Somewhere deep inside was the idea that one day I will actually visit the LC. (Slide 11) This dream became reality sooner that I could expect, as I found myself attending grad school in Washington DC. Some years later I became the Chair of the PCC Policy Committee which actually sets policies regarding how things were entered on those little cards we used to process in Cairo. Of course now there were no more cards and everything was digital, but the principles of organization of information remain the same.

Conclusion

I spent the first 20 years at OSUL in the basement of this building. Now I am speaking to you from the very top floor of Thompson. I have a very beautiful view of the campus and the broader outside world.

It was my desire to emerge from behind the cataloger’s terminal and the basement that allowed me first to work with the Library of Congress, then to visit the palace of Hatshepsut, and finally hear the real Big Ben chiming.

When I received news of my promotion to full professor, some people asked me if I was going to retire. Somehow they saw this as a culmination of a long career. In my mind, this seemed like another opportunity, more like a beginning.

Thank you. (Slide 12)