

A Scholarly communication perspective of Grey literature in Library and Information Science education

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to inform library and information science (LIS) educators of the status of grey literature among LIS students in the United States. More specifically the article examines what students enrolled in ALA-accredited library and information science programs know about grey literature and where they learned about it. Masters-level students at three North American LIS programs answered a four-question survey. Findings revealed that knowledge about grey literature is gained across the curriculum with general reference sources being the course most likely to address grey literature. Findings also indicate that knowledge about grey literature is more intuitive and anecdotal than systematically acquired. In addition to the implications of the results, the relationship among grey literature, the library profession, and library education is discussed. The article concludes with suggestions for further analysis and research.

Literature review and justification

The most-cited definition for grey literature is "that which is produced by government, academics, business, and industries, both in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishing interests and where publishing is not the primary activity of the organization" (Farace, 1997). ODLIS (Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science) provides a slightly different definition of the term: "Documentary material in print and electronic formats, such as reports, preprints, internal documents (memoranda, newsletters, market surveys, etc.), theses and dissertations, conference proceedings, technical specifications and standards, trade literature, etc., not readily available through regular market channels because it was never commercially published/listed or was not widely distributed." While definitions proliferate, there is agreement on the main characteristics of grey literature: they are materials that are published not for profit and, as a result, typically not marketed or distributed by commercial publishing organizations (Mackenzie Owen, 1997). In other words, grey literature is discussed in terms of its origins, its methods of dissemination, or both.

The research conducted by Sulouff et al. (2005), whose paper is most closely related to the theme of this study, points out that grey literature "takes different forms in different departmental settings" so that a working definition is often based on circumstance. The library sector carries responsibility for the management and processing of grey literature. This role is acknowledged by several researchers (Mackenzie Owen, 1997; Sulouff et al., 2005) although they have written largely about the role that librarians take with regard to grey literature, but little about how librarians learn about grey literature. The role of librarians is described as promoting dissemination and use of grey literature through cataloging, searching, archiving and preservation (Mackenzie Owen, 1997). Gelfand believes that these roles, at least with regard to grey literature, are learned on the job: "training and bibliographic familiarity... does not follow a curriculum or a set of readers of textbooks, but instead studied by doing" (Gelfand, 1998).

Research regarding grey literature in library and information studies has focused on case studies, such as that by Aina (2000), more than on grey literature in library and information science education. An environmental scan, described in more detail below (note 10), supports Gelfand's view that training in grey literature is mostly field, and not curriculum, driven. With regard to formal instruction of grey literature in library and information science programs in the United States, the only full scale framework identified is Dominic Farace's distance education course offered at the University of New Orleans, though one must note that the course is offered as part of a school library media program in the department of education, and not in a Master's of Library Science program¹.

Library and information professionals are a vital link in the chain that makes grey literature available to researchers, students and the interested public. While on-the-job training is invaluable, certainly the purpose of graduate-level training is that professionals are hired with some baseline knowledge that they bring to the work place upon graduation. Courses that educate future librarians in areas relating to grey literature are critical training ground if awareness to grey literature is to increase.

The purpose of this paper is to identify what students currently enrolled in MLS programs know about grey literature and where they learn it. Once we have a clearer picture of the training currently available, we can open a discussion between library professionals, library educators and library students to determine how library education can best assist in meeting the needs of the current workplace and use LIS education to strengthen the relevance of current graduates to the workplace.