

The catalogue as language, quality as service: an experience at the University of Florence

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A glance behind the scenes

Once upon a time This contribution, aiming at relating the experience made at the Florence University, might begin with this words.

In a period not too far away, at the end of the eighties, the University of Florence included 21 libraries and 77 collections, some greatly valuable for their completeness, updating and constant growth but isolated, closed in themselves, in their way of conceiving services and offering them, in their cataloguing and management procedures¹.

The common language in this "little Babel" was found in Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale which was put into effect with two aims in mind, one of a "pedagogic nature", i.e. the training of librarians aware of the importance of adopting common cataloguing practices respecting international standards, the other one of an "organizational nature", i.e. assuming a working method centered on cooperation and resource sharing. A third, perhaps more meaningful, aspect was to be found within Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale (SBN) in the choice of its name: a culture of service.

The Library service, a central administrative office, was flanked by a Coordination Operative Group (GRO), a technical structure made up of librarians responsible for the various applications of SBN in the libraries, with the task of identifying operative, homogeneous standards and to play the role of tutors in each unit.

It is in this context that the issue of the control of access points to the catalogue was faced for the first time, trying to envisage a set of controlled terms by means of developing an authority list for Greek, Latin and ancient East authors, for Medieval and Renaissance ones, for uniform titles of works by classical authors and anonymous works and for subject headings. The limited dimensions of the catalogue allowed, even without automatic control, an *a posteriori* analysis of the information thus created, as well as the possibility of dialogue with the single librarians on specific issues.

Furthermore, the presence of the notes field in the link between the rejected forms and the accepted terms allowed brief apparatus and explanatory notes. Lacking a national authority file, the GRO saw to locating, choosing and describing national and international reference material for each linguistic and disciplinary field, helped in this work by the librarians' personal competence, by the development of a common experience and by an innovative interaction with the academic staff.

The stage

The years in which this activity was carried out were important years for academic libraries that felt that, in a global context, they were asked to play a new and basic role in the growth of information needs, in terms of both quality and quantity, as well as in the development of the demand for more and more refined documentation. In fact, in those years, we witness the schift from the "age of

¹M. CITRONI, L'applicazione di SBN nell'Università di Firenze: situazione attuale e prospettive di sviluppo, in *La cooperazione interbibliotecaria: livelli istituzionali e politiche: atti del convegno regionale, Firenze ..., 27-29 novembre 1989*, a cura di Susanna Peruginelli, Anna Marie Speno, Firenze, Giunta regionale toscana; Milano, Bibliografica, 1990, p. 153-159.

collection building" to the "*age of service*"², a new organization culture that moving the focus of the library mission from the mere implementation of book collections to providing access to the information owned or to the one offered as provider of services for its users³.

Service management, then, is the new organization model, that directs attention from the product to the market and that evaluates quality in terms not of results but of customer satisfaction, giving the user, with his/her information needs, behaviour, expectations, a central role taken directly from the business world.

The new concept of a client-centered library⁴ became one of the building blocks for the new library system at the University of Florence that had as its primary aim to improve its informational service and preservation of its bibliographic collections, directed at a better use and a constant, assessable promotion of the quality of its services.⁵ The university library system presented itself as a workshop for the development of organization approaches directed to satisfying its users.

It is in this context that new services were created, like *reference*, *ILL*, *DD*, that strengthen the traditional ones, like lending, opening times, spaces for studying.

"Madamina, il catalogo è questo"*

*W. A. Mozart, Don Giovanni, atto 1., scena 4.

What about the catalogue? Actually the catalogue had been user oriented since its inception, having as its objective "*the connection between book A and reader B*" condensed in a vividly clear formula by Gorman⁶. However Cutter⁷ too had been very clear when he had put the public's "convenience" before the cataloger's when applying rules, even to the detriment of the systematic nature of the catalogue.

Anyway in the everyday activities in documentation centers the methodologies put into effect to organize collections as well as indexes to provide access to them, even though designed to meet the information needs of users consulting them, have sometimes become a hindrance for fruition of the document. Thus it may happen that the catalogue is felt by the user as an intrusive infrastructure, and that it fails to keep its institutional objective: to communicate and retrieve information.

The fact that the user's central role had been long neglected in the cataloguing process had not helped to overcome these difficulties. The catalogue had been considered, for a long time, in terms of quality of the recorded bibliographic data – accuracy, adherence to rules, interpretation of the latter – with little attention to readability and clarity, and, most of all, with no check on how effective users' searches resulted⁸.

The electronic catalogue, "revolutionizing", according to a stimulating image devised by Weston and Pernigotti⁹, the user's approach to the catalogue, made even more inadequate a tool, not designed as *user-centered*, to become a new and more effective language for connection in the organization of knowledge. That catalogue, "no longer linked to the user's needs" nor "to the ways

² M. GORMAN, Avoiding the seven deadly sins, or technology and future of library service in academic libraries, in *People come first: user centered library service*, edited by Dale S. Montanelli and Patricia F. Stenstrom, Chicago, Association of college and research libraries, 1999, p. 1-12.

³ P. BROPHY, *The academic library*, London, Library association publishing, 2000, p.

⁴ C. MARTELL, *The client-centered academic library: an organization model*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood press, 1983 cited in M. Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁵ Vedi < <http://www.unifi.it/universita/biblioteche/progetto/progetto.htm> >, see also L. VANNUCCI, Cambiare la gestione, gestire il cambiamento, in *Biblioteche oggi*, 17 (1999), 7, p. 14-22.

⁶ M. Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷ C. A. CUTTER,

⁸ P. F. STENSTROM, Cataloging: a case study of self-imposed obsolescence, in *People come first: user centered library service*, edited by Dale S. Montanelli and Patricia F. Stenstrom, Chicago, Association of college and research libraries, 1999, p. 65-78.

⁹ P. G. WESTON, A. PERNIGOTTI, *La biblioteca nel computer: come automatizzare?*, Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1990, p.

the information process is organized and made clear in it" abdicated its chief task: to be the "historically formed, tool"¹⁰ and was running the risk of being confined to the overcrowded limbo of procedures worth in themselves.

The belief that the catalogue is rooted in its environment, in the creation of a different correlation in the communication between user and document, in the need for new services designed to disseminate information was the element that quickened the process for a change at the Florence University library system. It was no longer seen only as a bibliography, property and management tool, rather, as a service, a *user-centered catalog*, born and assuming its form while it is consulted, conditioned if not determined by its users, a catalogue interacting with its environmental and cultural context, the more effective the more it is known and understood.

Implementing the catalogue as a service meant the adoption of two assumptions hiding at their heart features of novelty for the library world.

- a) shifting attention from the product to the client, i.e. moving from the quality (or expected as such) catalographic datum to the quality information mediation functional to its targeted public;
- b) creating a new cataloguer/user relationship enhancing their interaction.

To meet assumption b) we opted for a permanent training plan for the library staff, with the aim of steering it towards a culture of service allowing, at the same time, a professional growth, as a reward for being involved in more than one activity, developing and keeping competence and specialisation required in a rapidly evolving context¹¹. To meet assumption a) we looked for a solution by promoting a shared working method based on quality.

The troupe at its début: “Notte e giorno a faticar”*

*W.A. Mozart, Don Giovanni, atto 1., introduzione

At this point we need straying briefly from the point to relate how, concomitant to the reorganization of services, a migration of the catalogue from the Florence local node to the national index took place. The download of the records of 240000 titles and 110000 authors into a not-integrated, cumulated union catalogue¹², caused considerable havoc in the everyday catalogue management and made users perplexed rather than served by a catalogue lacking consistency.

In order to follow the post-migration activities, the working Group for the management and maintenance of the catalogue was formed – according to the organization model employed at the Florence library system – it was entrusted with the tasks related to the ordinary management of the SBN catalogue – adjustments, proposals for corrections, etc. – plus the additional, urgent and necessary steps to prevent duplication of serial and monographic titles and of authors. All this was, and is, possible thanks to a cooperation protocol with the National Central Library in Florence that let us use its software for unifying titles and authors and correcting them.

The belief that consistent changes were needed in the quality of the catalogue to enable patrons to have a more effective use of the current and historical collections and an integrated access to electronic resources, was at the basis of the next choice, i.e. that this Group might become the technical-organizing reference structure, in charge of the coordination of cataloguing activities and the promotion of the cataloguers' knowledge particularly of the professional technological developments and their impact on the service.

The organization model of the working Group, characterized by an open, cooperative and motivative spirit, putting at stake individual capabilities and qualifications, turned out to be a

¹⁰ L. CROCKETTI, R. DINI, *ISBD(M). Introduzione ed esercizi*, 3. ed., Milano, Bibliografica, 1995, p. 11.

¹¹ L. VANNUCCI, La formazione continua del personale nei sistemi bibliotecari: il caso dell'Università di Firenze, in *Bollettino AIB*, 40 (2000), 1, p. 61-74.

¹²P. G. WESTON, Catalogazione bibliografica: dal formato MARC a FRBR, in *Bollettino AIB*, 41 (2001), 3, p. 269, and, more generally M. Guerrini, Il catalogo di qualità: che vi sia, ciascun lo dice, dove sia, nessun lo sa, in M. Guerrini, *Il catalogo di qualità*, Firenze, Pagnini e Martinelli, Regione toscana, p. 44.

success element for the cataloguer; who reassessed his/her professional profile and it facilitated the development of interaction with the public.¹³

The actors on the stage: “In questa forma, dunque”*

*W.A. Mozart, Don Giovanni, atto primo scena 6.

Once the action scopes had been defined, related to correcting, avoiding duplicates and standardizing, at the end of a context analysis, the Group started planning its activities, based on specific professional capabilities within the group, identifying objectives and defining priorities.

The first intervention area proved to be the one for the creation and dissemination of common standards through a clear and uniform implementation of cataloguing rules, also in view of the lack of a single code, as well as of the possession and access to the related documentation. Besides the training courses and tutor activities, during the development of the project, we attempted to remedy the problem by putting a case-book at disposal on line that treats dubious cases and experiences, integrating them with rules and official updates¹⁴.

The second action area was identified in the need to promote, as a necessary activity, particularly in a global communication and hybrid library context, the control of access points, starting from the assumption that "without authority control the referential and syndetic structures of the catalogue have feet of clay"¹⁵.

Even within the limits of the SBN operative context we tried to obtain the formal homogeneity of the terms chosen as access points, names of personal authors and corporate bodies, uniform titles and titles of series, conforming to the standard form of the relative authority lists of the Italian National Bibliography. It is from this viewpoint that a list subdivided by discipline that locates and notifies the reference sources for the formulation of headings is in a phase of redefinition and updating. With regard to access control in semantic indexes a requalification process is taking place, based on authority file maintenance and clearance in relation to string coherence according to the statement in the Soggettario di Firenze, to terminology control of descriptors, to the suitability of new subject headings.

The great disciplinary range offered by an academic library requires the necessary coverage of specialized competence for the choice of the standard form and the indication of the reference sources, all this makes professional updating a constant condition for the librarian.

The third activity area identified regards the continuous catalogue monitoring and clearance operations: The experience got during the years has made us well aware of how onerous and inadequate *a posteriori* control and corrections are – as we are still forced to do with the flattening of duplicate catalographic data – and conversely, it has convinced us that we need a strong commitment in the definition of shared knowledge and decentralized capacities, confident that the interpretation key consists in the even too simple assumption "to err less in order to correct less".

That's why attention to continuous training and tutoring remains central, a light institution that sums up training and help during the everyday work. This model of decentralized responsibility – at least a Group member for each area library – has been repeated also in the procedure for channelling the requests for correction, duplication, difformity signalling or for simple clarification and comparison requests received by the Group.

The chain of actions is typical of the systemic perspective in which libraries operate: wherever the quality of the catalogue is easily readable in terms of effective overall services, a coherent archive, selected and updated working tools, logically planned management procedures, conscious librarians

¹³ G. P. QUAGLINO, S. CASAGRANDE, A. M. CASTELLANO, *Gruppo di lavoro, lavoro di gruppo: un modello di lettura nella dinamica di gruppo, una proposta di intervento nelle organizzazioni*, Milano, Cortina, 1992, *passim*.

¹⁴ < <http://www.unifi.it/universita/biblioteche/af/libr991.htm> >.

¹⁵ M. Guerrini, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

will guarantee quickly accessible documents. Another element, as stressed by Guerrini¹⁶, of a quality, user oriented catalogue.

The curtain is lowered

Then, if the quality catalogue is the user oriented one, apt to manage a more effective dissemination of information, speaking in the different languages of the personal and subjective search strategies, the experience told in this paper wants to be an attempt at fulfilling the mission of producing personalized, quality services as prerequisite of a solid, long-lasting relationship with the library users.

¹⁶ M. Guerrini, *op. cit.*, p. 39-40.