Interview with Siobhan Stevenson

By: Alison Callahan

Siobhan Stevenson is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Information. Her research focuses on a broad range of information policy issues, including equity of access, the changing role of the library in the global economy, and the role of information professionals in the public arena.

Alison Callahan: I'm with Siobhan Stevenson, assistant professor at the Faculty of Information, to discuss the faculty’s recent change from a traditional library and archives school to an information school. May I start, Siobhan, by asking you what you think of the iSchool movement in general?

Siobhan Stevenson: I think it's an excellent development in the field of LIS. It's necessary, it's completely appropriate, and it's completely timely. Having said that, though, I'm actually distinguishing between what I perceive is happening in the States and what's going on here. If we look at the history of LIS in the academy, it has gone through transitions and transformations repeatedly in a quest for recognition and status within the wider academic community. It's got this chip on its shoulder. There's lots of good discussion around why that might be: gender issues, female-dominated professions, practical profession as opposed to the humanities or pure sciences. If you put it into context, it's just another instance of that.

AC: Another iteration?

SS: Right. I didn't like the iteration because not only was that happening, but it was also picking up on the commercialization of education and the commodification of the public sphere.

AC: Right, so a response to other variables.

SS: It was attempting to commercialize what information schools are about in a way that was attractive to industry. Which is fine for the students that didn't even exist then -- we didn't have industry students necessarily. It was trying to create this whole new community and world.

AC: A new approach?

SS: Yes, and in order to do that it needed to distinguish itself from the history, and so it has to denigrate the history.

AC: That's a bit of a negative thing, then.

SS: Yeah, it's problematic. I attended the iConference in the States, and it was very technologically focused and almost technologically deterministic -- acritical and atheoretical. And that's fine. That's what it is. Then you get this iSchool thing in Canada, and that's what Brian [Cantwell Smith] was all about. I think he distinguished between the Canadian and American experience really effectively. He's tried to embrace the whole package.

AC: Right, so instead of denigrating the history, it's sort of using it as a base and saying, "This is also an important part of our education."

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SS: But we also need to add these new pieces, this new perspective. And the other thing that was great about Brian was that his vision was open ended. So it wasn't "Okay, we need to add these pieces to get to here." Instead, it was "Okay, we need to add these pieces and we'll see where we go." That's what’s so attractive about it, and I think it resonates and it works.

AC: Especially since most students starting this program suddenly see how applicable it is to a great number of professions. That's my opinion, anyway. The reason I'm not called a librarian anymore is because I don't just sit in a library, and those aren't the only skills I’m gaining by being here and thinking about these issues. Let’s hope the iSchool can bring that realization to a larger group, too, and use it as motivation.

SS: I hope so. That's why we need students to speak about their experiences. When I was preparing for the [Management of Information Organizations] course, I was amazed at the volume of work about Generation Y. That's the thing about the iSchool: it really turns the notion of the faculty as the experts on its head. Faculty bring all kinds of expertise that needs to be recognized, but setting a direction that can only come from the bottom.

AC: From the incoming students.

SS: Yes, and what was amazing in the [Management] class was that for the first time there were these young people saying, “Well, I'm only X age, and there are all these older people in class, and I'm not going to say anything." And of course, they have a wealth of opinions. And they're the ones people are going to have to listen to. So anyway, for this iSchool, that's the piece we'll have to keep writing on, in concert with the students. The only thing is, there are people who, in the end, want to get a job, and that's absolutely legitimate.

AC: Yes, that's still a very important goal.

SS: We have a responsibility to that, and the traditional institutions are still sitting there. And they pay well. They're not going anywhere in the next ten years, for instance. So how do you balance giving people those practical, very hands-on, traditional librarian skills?

AC: How are you bringing the iSchool philosophy into your courses? Are you able to do that?

SS: You can do it somewhat. That's where we changed the curriculum. It was established at a time when the iSchool notion wasn't even alive. I will be honest with you: in the management course, it’s difficult to do. It's just a practical kind of introduction to those fundamental ideas. There's very little room there.

AC: How about your digital divides course?

SS: Yes, the digital divides course and the public libraries course are going to be reflective of iSchool philosophy. It’s about challenging the assumptions around traditional definitions, traditional notions. The digital divide is a critical appraisal of that. My goal for the public libraries course is to really nurture and prepare people who come to the course who want to work in public libraries -- get them ready to hit the ground running. My work in public libraries now is completely theoretical. It's critical.
I unpack them as institutes of the state -- part of the problem as opposed to part of the solution. I
actually see them as having the potential to be part of the solution, but in a very different political
economy.

AC: Is that at all related to the diffusion of the information movement and technologies throughout our
society?

SS: It very much goes hand in hand with that. But I guess I just see it in a more radicalized version. For
instance, look at the many people who have the resources and bypass the public library. And look at the
people who don't have the resources -- what they're getting [at the library] is not helping them get past
whatever situation they're in. I would see the public library as focusing on those people.

AC: Do you think that's because having those kinds of skills and access to those resources is becoming
more critical for every member of society?

SS: Exactly. And also the notion of a “new literacy.” That’s the whole thing I have around open source
and open access to code. I keep wondering if, you know, we had to know ABCs, 123s, and then also
basic coding. It's so rarefied, and I have a problem with that because it's exclusionary in and of itself.
Everyone will say, "Well, yeah, most people don't want to know how to do that." Okay, that's fine, but I
think people need to know something more than they know now. I don't know what that is yet, but it’s
about equity.

AC: It needs to be couched in a different way. Portrayed differently.

SS: In Third World countries, they talk about open source as a productivity tool and a way to develop
indigenous economic growth and sustainable growth within the information economy. We need to do
that for our impoverished pockets in North America and in the West, because there are lots of analyses
about how Third World conditions are replicated in the First. These are the issues of interest to me.
With that argument, I would say public libraries could play an interesting role. It's completely different
from what they do.

AC: But if you teach those sorts of ideas and then you have students going out and working in a public
library...

SS: I think the thing for me is that the students want to make a difference. They don't like the way
things are, and they want to see it change. I want to get them thinking, ‘oh, there's one site where such a
change can happen.’

AC: Giving them the tools.

SS: They can have the confidence to go and do it. There's no question. They just need the confidence to
know there is an institution where you can go in and take over, essentially.

AC: Right, and have the knowledge about how it works so they can go down the right avenues.

SS: That's exactly it. That's very different from some public library courses you'd get elsewhere. If you
have practice articulating a vision, then you'll get somewhere. I think that's an iSchool thing. It's really
about shedding light on something that is traditional. It's so benign, the public library. It's such a benign kind of place. And that's why it's so powerful. I know, it is just a library, but it's an institute of the state -- well funded, recognized, and highly conservative -- and it plays a legitimating role. It has a legitimating function for the status quo. I think it's really important to recognize that.

AC: The idea of an information school is that it encompasses much, much more. Do you think that needs to be reflected in the public sphere? Even in strengthening the education that the library provides for the public?

SS: It is obscene the training that goes on and it's all on Microsoft products. That's problematic in my view. If you really want people to move out of poverty, you have to give them concrete skills, even in terms of providing alternatives to the global media. The library just replicates this.

AC: There is a lot of emphasis on user-generated commentary and public journalism. There has been increasing emphasis on providing those kinds of resources.

SS: Having a library as a source of that kind of information. Absolutely.

AC: Helping users recognize that they can get that kind of information and communicate with other like-minded individuals.

SS: Yes, absolutely. That kind of two-way conversation, that huge conversation, is great. It has to be such an ongoing dialogue. That would be the iSchool thing for sure.