

Knowledge Services and SLA's History: An Interview with Guy St. Clair

Nearly One Hundred Years of "Putting Knowledge to Work"

For more than thirty years, Guy St. Clair has focused much of his attention on specialized libraries and on SLA. His experience with the association (including a term as SLA's president in 1991-1992) has provided St. Clair with a unique perspective about the management of information, knowledge, and learning, the three disciplines that he says are converging in the coming new profession of *knowledge services*. St. Clair has even written a book about how knowledge services practitioners should be educated (*Beyond Degrees: Professional Learning for Knowledge Services*, published by K.G. Saur). Not so coincidentally, St. Clair is also the author of SLA's centennial history, to be published in 2009. Already well into the SLA project, St. Clair is finding useful parallels for today's knowledge professionals in the attention that SLA's founders gave to practical information.

It's a topic St. Clair frequently brings into his many presentations about knowledge services. He has just concluded a series of speeches and lectures about the new information profession for a variety of audiences, including some as far away as Australia and New Zealand. In addition, he has recently spoken on the subject to eight of SLA's North American chapters. St. Clair recently found time in his busy schedule to speak with Douglas Newcomb about SLA's history, and about how that history has led organizations to focus on knowledge services.

Information Outlook: What is it that's drawn you to SLA over the years? You've been a member for many years, and you often speak about how you couldn't have "had a career" without SLA. What does that mean?

Guy St. Clair: My career has focused on learning. It's the one driver in my life, this quest – almost an obsession, I suppose – to learn. My career began in librarianship, and it was while I was working in a specialized library that I was introduced to SLA. From the beginning, SLA was a place for me to grow, to learn and to share with others what I've learned. And that's the very essence of knowledge services, what I like to call KD/KS, knowledge development and knowledge sharing. As my career has moved forward, I've been very fortunate to have a relationship with SLA. It's been SLA that's provided the strategic learning for me, as well as the connections, and, not to put too fine a point on it, a market for my company's services.

IO: What are those services? What do you do?

GStC: It's a question I'm asked a lot. Our company, SMR International, is a management consulting practice. Although we're located in New York City, I go wherever the need is, and that means I work all over the world. Basically, what we do is strategy consulting. Our job is to look at a situation, to assess the current set-up and, by focusing on identifying opportunities and looking for results, to imagine the future. SMR International is usually engaged to conduct a knowledge services audit, a management review, or some other evaluative activity. Then, working with a client team, we help the organization develop a strategy plan for knowledge services (or, as is usually the case, for *improving* knowledge services that are already in place).

IO: Don't you do a lot of training as well?

GStC: Yes. A big piece of our company's work is establishing formal learning activities, and I suppose you could say SMR International is a training company as well as a consulting practice. We put together all sorts of strategic learning programs, workshops, seminars and the like for organizations, and many of these are set up with me as the discussion leader or teacher. Teaching is probably my true calling – it's what I do best and it's what I love. So of course we incorporate teaching and learning into SMR International's work, because our clients ask for it and because I like doing it.

IO: Your company's area of expertise is knowledge services. Talk a little more about the concept.

GStC: Knowledge services is a name I've given to the convergence of information management, knowledge management, and strategic (performance-centered) learning in society today, particularly in the organizational workplace. I speak of knowledge services as the new profession for information and knowledge workers, because it's what I've identified information customers and organizational management want – and need – as they attempt to deal with all the information and knowledge that's hurled at them, and for which they often have some level of responsibility. With respect to knowledge services, it long ago became clear to me that the people who do it best are specialist librarians, people like members of SLA. So it's our company's job to work with these people, many of whom I know through SLA, to provide the links, to help organizations figure out how they can converge these three disciplines for best performance, as they seek to achieve their organizational mission.

IO: Do you envision this new profession as being different from library and information management as practiced today?

GStC: Absolutely. I see knowledge services as a new profession that embraces all practitioners in all the disciplines that support information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning. That includes, of course, specialist librarians, and we should be taking the lead in this effort. But it also includes a lot more than library management and it requires us – in our thinking as employees – to move from the “library” side of our work to a more “organizational” focus. The role of knowledge services professionals is to enable KD/KS in their organizations, to set up a framework, an ambiance, if you will, so that knowledge development and knowledge sharing are routinely built in to every transaction and every interaction that takes place in the organization. No one does this as well as specialist librarians. In fact, we’ve been doing it all along, so we’re naturally the best people for leading the knowledge services effort in our organizations.

IO: Why?

GStC: Because we’re not like other librarians or, indeed, like any other practitioners in the information industry. As I work on the association’s centenary history, a couple of things have become clear to me. One is that there is a clearly established distinction between specialized librarianship and other forms of librarianship. As I’ve worked on the history, I’ve come to understand that this difference is – and has been all along – one of definition. Specialized librarianship exists to provide practical information. It’s what our founders had in mind, and of course that attention to the delivery of practical information was what caused so much of the tension with library leaders of the time. For the profession’s leaders in those days, librarianship

existed as part of the educational framework. Librarianship was thought of (and still is, by some people) as a scholarly, academic, cultural, and – for some librarians – as an almost “social-work” type of profession. In this latter respect, nineteenth-century librarianship was characterized by, as one historian has put it, its almost “missionary-like” zeal in attempting to “better” the lives of people by exposing them to reading, and we know that much of that has carried over into librarianship as it is practiced today. That’s not what specialist librarians do, so it’s very much a question of definition.

IO: Can you elaborate?

GStC: The history of specialized librarianship identifies three unique attributes of specialized libraries. The first is that the collections (or the services provided, if what you have is an information or knowledge center that is not a collection of materials) have to do with a particular – or “special” – subject or field of interest. The second, naturally enough, is that the customers for whom these services are provided are also “special” in that they have particular needs and requirements relating to that subject or field of interest. But the most important distinction is the third reason specialist librarians are different: success in specialized librarianship requires – no, *demand*s – a collaborative relationship between the information provider, the specialist librarian, and the information customer. This isn’t the case with other types of librarianship. Generally speaking, in most situations, librarianship as it is generally practiced is not built on a collaborative relationship between the user and the librarian. Specialized librarianship is.

As it turns out, that collaboration is the very foundation of successful knowledge services, of establishing a management framework in which information, knowledge, and learning are all organized and managed with one goal in mind: the successful achievement of the organization’s

mission. No one is better qualified to do this than specialist librarians. As was shown in the work of the PREPS Commission back in the early 1990s, in SLA's splendid and seminal work on competencies for specialized librarianship, and in the writings of many of its members (particularly Marion Paris in her important article in the December, 1999, issue of *Information Outlook*), specialized librarianship is not like the general profession of librarianship that has evolved. Naturally that very situation has contributed to a great deal of the tension that exists between specialist librarians and other librarians, but that's nothing new. That tension has been in place throughout the history of specialized librarianship.

IO: Is that a bad thing?

GStC: Not at all. It's a little uncomfortable from time to time, and at certain points in SLA's history some bad feelings were generated and some very unpleasant actions were taken, but by and large, I think this tension is a good thing. It forces specialist librarians – and other knowledge services professionals as we move into the new profession – to understand that their role in their organizations is directly connected to the work they do, the providing of practical and utilitarian information that helps the employing organization succeed. It's not academic, or theoretical, or cultural, or created to advance some social or political agenda. It's not educational. And it's certainly not social work, in the sense that you're going to make someone a better person because he or she comes to the library. It's there to provide support for the organization.

IO: When did all this happen, this separating of specialized librarianship from other forms of librarianship?

GStC: Well, it's been around a long time, but it all really started in the nineteenth century, probably connected in some way with the industrial revolution and the need for information management that supported industry. By 1909, this distinction had certainly been identified and was totally accepted by Dana, Marion, Whitten, Lee, Handy, and the SLA's other founders, and they were very clear about what they were trying to do. In the words of John Lapp, specialized librarianship is all about "putting knowledge to work." These people recognized that the general notion of librarianship – as then practiced and continuing long into modern times – was not doing that, was not meeting these needs.

IO: So was there a disconnect between formal librarianship and specialized librarianship?

GStC: Yes. Knowledge was certainly being collected, and organized. But it wasn't being put to work, not through the efforts of librarians. SLA was needed because information customers needed it, needed this new way of thinking about information and information delivery. In fact, in the SLA history, I have a chapter at the beginning of the book entitled "The Establishment of Modern Librarianship in America." In this chapter, I assert that it was with the founding of SLA that modern American librarianship – as we know it – was able to happen. What Americans required was a two-track type of librarianship, one concentrating on academic, scholarly, cultural, and societal needs, the other providing practical and utilitarian information for the workplace. It's taken us 95 years to get to the point where we're willing to accept this distinction (and some in our field are still unwilling to accept it), but that's where we are now. And now we recognize that it is knowledge services that will pick up on what specialized librarianship has been doing and take us into the future. Knowledge services, with its emphasis on excellence in information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning, is what specialized

librarianship has been about all along, so we're naturally positioned to lead in the information industry in the future.

IO: Why are you writing the history of SLA?

GStC: I'm doing this for a number of reasons. First of all, it's a very personal thing. I love this organization and I want to see us make it succeed. I think the best way for us to do that is to take a look at where we've come from, at what some of our predecessors have experienced, and see if we can't match their experiences to our lives today. But I also want to write the history because I write the kind of stuff that people seem to want to read. It isn't scholarly or theoretical or highly empirical or anything like that. It's telling a story, which is the way I write. Even the management books I write are framed around a reader sitting down to learn something about how to get from A to B, and to enjoy learning about how to get there. And history is great fun to write, to research, to study, and just to think about. I wrote another organizational history about fifteen years ago, about a cultural institution in New York, and I learned more about New York (and American!) society than I ever expected to know. I loved the learning, and now the same thing is happening with the history of SLA.