

Mini-profile:

a day in the life of an iSchool associate professor



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[Author's note: What follows here is a complete fraud. I doubt I've ever had a "typical day" in my entire life; I used to think I would, that things would settle down and find a routine, but so far, no go. We'll just pretend, shall we?]

The first of several cups of coffee is clutched firmly in my hands as I make my way upstairs to my office. Once inside, I pick my way carefully to the desk, fire up the computer, unpack my bag and see what the day has to offer. My office is quite the conversation piece, as you can imagine. New people can't help but marvel at the scene that confronts them and old friends always seem to find some new insight in the piles and levels and layers which surround and support me. As someone once said, it's really a nest, and despite appearances, I can find just about anything in there within 45 seconds. (How can people work with clean offices and bare surfaces? I just don't get it.)

There are always the obligatory e-mails: notes from other faculty or staff on school business, questions or issues from students and advisees, colleagues corresponding on weighty matters, weird

news articles from my partner – the usual continuum of just about everybody's life these days. I also check my voice mail; as one of the last people left in the known universe without a cell phone – yes, you read that right – I do still get voice mail in my office, now and then.

North American academics typically categorize their work in three ways: research or scholarship, teaching, and service (to the profession or institution). These lines can easily blur – does peer-



reviewing an article count as research or service? – but this provides a useful framework for thinking about what a typical day would be like. If I ever had one.

On this mythical day, I'd probably be working on writing something; either a column or an opinion piece, a scholarly article or something for a book. I've written all of these, and each provides a different forum for ideas: the journal article, sharing the results of new research with a scholarly or professional community; the column, a dart, sharp and quick, aimed at a specific target with at most one idea; or the book, where multiple ideas flow together, diverge, and combine, often in ways that surprise even me.

My morning might start out, though, by teaching. I love to teach; I've been doing it one way or another since I was an undergraduate, over 25 years now, and I have to say I'm getting pretty good at it. I primarily teach in the areas of information sources and services, reference work, a wee bit of history, and research methods and statistics, the legacy of my long-ago mathematics degree and strong graduate quantitative preparation.

I don't need to tell this audience that a great deal has changed in the world of reference and information services work, certainly since I got my masters degree in 1983. It was assumed then that we would know and appreciate the differences between, say, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and that we could decide between them, use them, and even instruct a bit about them on the fly, with no warning, should the need arise on the reference desk.

So many aspects of that scenario are different, or even gone, now. Reference work takes so many forms, resources have come and gone and changed and merged, the expectations of clients have scattered and, of course, there's a strong technological component to all of that. And I'm still teaching all of this in two weekly 2-hour classes, for ten weeks. The challenge is no longer what to teach, it's deciding what *not* to teach, how much of the Old Stuff is still viable (when was the last time you touched a one-volume general encyclopedia, other than to pitch it?) and how much of the New Stuff (Wikipedia, anyone?) to incorporate. Moreover, as we all know, that's a running battle, which won't end any time soon.

I do occasionally get away with days where I don't have a meeting or five, all part of the collegiality of the academic unit. I'll spare you these – probably the only thing worse than having

a meeting is listening about someone else's – but I will say that my colleagues at the Information School (iSchool) are by and large a terrific group, and if I don't often look forward to meetings, I rarely dread them.

What we've done at this school is quite remarkable. We've gathered a collection of exceptionally smart, talented, creative, energetic people, from a wide variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines and forged a group that is far greater than the sum of its parts. Our faculty have backgrounds in all areas of librarianship and information science, but also in human-computer interaction, design, information management, policy, and more. My favorite example? On this same faculty, we have the first endowed professorship in children's services (named for Beverly Cleary, a distinguished alumna) and the winner of the very prestigious best paper award at the CHI conference. Twice. And we're all here because we share a passion and fascination for how information works, and doesn't, and how we can make that better. The information school movement is an exciting exploration of just what such a department can be like, and the results to date are more than encouraging.

Then I'd probably work on preparing a keynote speech for a conference. Perhaps one of the most rewarding parts of my life is the opportunity to engage with our professional community. I've been privileged over the last several years to have been invited to speak or present at conferences and libraries all over the world, seeing people and places a farm kid from upstate New York never dreamed of. I also get a chance to learn from these experiences, and what I see is a profession that is strong, but also hungry for ideas, inspiration, motivation, encouragement, reassurance...and the occasional short, sharp shock.

I try really hard not to give the "change or die" speech, because nobody wants to hear that and few people respond well to it. I do, however, believe that this is a signature moment in the history of our profession, fraught with difficulties and peril, and filled with opportunities almost beyond our imagining. Could libraries as we know them today be gone within a generation? Yes. Could the idea of the library develop and strengthen and become an even more vital part of the information lives of our communities and clientele? Absolutely. Most importantly of all, are we up to it?

As I head home, marveling at the beauty that is Seattle, I think I know the answer.