

# MLA and museum documentation

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Museums, libraries and archives have a common history some say. That may be right, but the interesting question is: Do they have something in common today?

For some years the acronym MLA has pointed out that there is a sector in which a group of institutions belong together. Some have explained this with political interests that merge the archives, the library and the museum sector into one, others that new media have a catalytic effect or that the stored stuff and the documentation have such a large similarity that co-operation is the only way into the future. The motives seems to be either external or internal, maybe both.

The MLA movement in Sweden started about 10 to 15 years ago. The motives was quite practical, The National Archives, National Library, The Nordic Museum, The National Heritage Board, The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs and some others started joint projects to handle new questions. Sweden has not a governmental standpoint about MLA yet. But the last five years we have seen a strong regional movement to experiment with MLA collaboration.

The educations for archivists, librarians and museum staff have not initiated partnerships or things like that, more than the MLA-institution at Uppsala University. But they have, on the other hand, no PhD-education to use for building research experience or networks. In 1995 a group started at Mid Sweden University to make a draft of a research project to see if it is possible to define a MLA-theory, or more precise (1) are the similarities in the MLA sector so big that you can describe the practice as more or less the same? (2) are the theory packages in the archival-, library- and museums science/museology similar to each other and have they the same focus? (3) with start in question 2; can we make a MLA-theory?

This started as a project at the Institution for Archival Science at Mid Sweden University and Museology at Umeå University in collaboration. Anyway this was hard to fund and the task was too big for one PhD student, so my assessment is to work with the history of Collection Management, based on the underlying or fundamental theories or the contextual theories. To

borrow a perspective from Thomas Kuhn: In what paradigms have the practice cultivated? The key question is: How can we understand the catalogues, the records and the information in databases with knowledge of the underlying frames of the work? Catalogues and records are systems helping to know and to find what there is in the storehouses. And my standpoint, is if we do not know under which circumstances the help systems are made, we can not know what we store, at least from a contextual point of view.

Someone say that you do not need to know a language history to use the language. Of course that is right. But a catalogue is not a well known framework of meanings where you can add more information until you know that the receiver of the message really understand your point.

Regarding the title MLA and museum documentation, my interpretation is: How can especially archivists and librarians use museum documentation? The easy answer is certainly yes! But is that a fact or is it a wish, related to what I just stated?

It is important to describe what we signify with those professions and institutions. The Swedish concept of an ordinary library is a public institution with the purpose of lending out books and other media to citizens and help people find information in printed or digital sources. The archive in a Swedish understanding is a records office or a public archive that store written documents from public institutions, organisations et al. They do not normally collect people's history, stories, dialects or things like that. So the mainstream archivist is a specialist in records management and knows the history of the local or regional government or the parliament. The librarian guides you in the jungle of media, special books or databases. Two years ago I had the opportunity to participate in a group that evaluated the MLA educations in Sweden. And this is in fact, what the education shall lead to.

Is this a problem someone say? Perhaps not, but in the Swedish education for archivists and librarians there is nothing about museums and what they store. There is a clear difference between the three professions. We know this already.

But what is the point with MLA if we can not use and allocate shared information? Do we need to turn the question? Is it possible to share museum documentation in the MLA sector that it will fit a common framework? What do we need to do with OUR information then?

My experience is that most of the museum collection management systems are made by curators for curators. It is relatively often digitised card catalogues for in-house use, sometimes with a webpage for the audience. In the libraries have the problems with public catalogues have been known for many years, and the systems are today seriously redesigned for the public domain. The classification tools, as well, as the automated systems for loan on the web are easy to use even for beginners. The archivists' professional standpoint is: Everything is possible to get. But naturally, you must know what you are looking for. You must know the history of the government to find something. In the archives sector private entrepreneurs have made a fortune with refining of archival records. In my experience, the professionals have the same attitude to the society as they always have had.

Do we need new perspectives in the sector if we want MLA? Yes I think it is necessary. We also need new knowledge about the documentation history and the help systems. If the help systems are made for non-expert use, we should at least have the option to say: We have the Content. You can find what you want, visit us!

I propose and hope that everyone interested in co-operation about these questions will participate in a discussion. Research and development should go together. Reflect and evaluate, but please, respond to this speech if you think it is important.

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