

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR INDEXERS:

“A MODEST PROPOSAL”

In 1729, the Anglo-Irish clergyman and writer Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, published a pamphlet entitled *A Modest Proposal, for preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick*. Swift, known for the coarseness and savagery as well as the wit and cleverness of his political satire, wrote the pamphlet in response to an ongoing debate about the many starving children begging in the streets of Dublin. Many of the “solutions” proposed were clearly aimed not at ameliorating the sufferings of these little ones, but at relieving the feelings of those inconvenienced by their presence: transportation, incarceration, and making begging a hanging offense, amongst others. Swift's shocking “Modest Proposal” took aim at these self-serving answers by suggesting a cannibalistic response: that these children should be fattened like cattle to feed the wealthy. It's still an extraordinarily powerful piece of writing which takes the consequences of treating human beings inhumanely to its logical and horrifying conclusion. It's a measure of the times that many people thought Swift was actually making a serious proposition.

I was reminded of Swift's pamphlet during the panel discussion on registration and accreditation in Seattle in 1998. In that session, representatives from ASI, Canada's IASC/SCAD, the Australian Society of Indexers, and the UK's Society of Indexers described the schemes for official professional recognition currently in place in AusSI and SI, and discussed the purposes and advantages of formal accreditation for indexers. The panel as a whole was pretty much pro-standards, but were not at that stage putting forward any concrete plan for ASI, although they did have some ideas for what an ASI accreditation program might be like.

The audience reaction, however, was as if the panel had proposed eating their children at that night's banquet – and I feel quite safe saying that, because I was one of the people in the audience whose gut reaction was along those lines, though I was not nearly as vocal about it as others (for a change – I'm not shy about expressing my opinions, so if other people were louder than me you can be sure feelings were running high). The vociferousness of the reaction effectively killed talk of professional standards within ASI for awhile. And maybe that's as it should be; it was clear, in that room in Seattle, that for American indexers (Canadian as well as US) accreditation was an idea whose time had NOT come.

So I want to say, right up front: I do NOT want to eat your children. I am NOT proposing that ASI set up a system for officially recognizing indexer skills, now or necessarily ever. My extremely modest proposal, today, is merely that we keep the dialogue open, keep ourselves informed about what other societies are doing and how their systems are faring, and keep in our minds the advantages as well as the disadvantages of devising and implementing a professional standards program.

“To Grow is to Change”

Well, you may ask yourselves, WHY should we keep talking about this if most people don't want it? Why am I addressing the subject if I don't even like the idea? One of my favorite quotes is something Cardinal Newman said, addressing the fact of change in the face of the idealized immutability of the Roman Catholic Church: “To grow is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” It's a useful ego massage when admitting that one's former views were, if not wrong, and least not entirely right. I began to be ripped screaming and shouting from my anti-standards stance by the growing theme of “professionalism” within the organization of ASI as a whole. Within the last two years, we have seen several discussions on Index-L and ASI-L about the problem of being recognized, or rather not recognized by our clients as professional people. Maria Coughlin held a roundtable on the issue of professionalism at last year's conference in Albuquerque, and Maria and Alexandra Nickerson held a workshop on that same subject this year (I wrote this talk before attending their workshop, so I won't address Maria and Alexandra's session directly here, but fellow attendees will note that many of their same ideas and concepts feed into my subject). Professionalism was also a keynote throughout last year's SI conference in Cambridge, England.

While we tend to view ourselves as professionals, it's sobering each year when I do my taxes to realize that the government regards me as part of an industry, not a profession. Traditionally the professions only embrace medicine, law, and theology, and to a lesser extent teaching, although the publishing and banking industries have long tried to tack themselves onto “the professions” as such. These fields are regarded as “professions” rather than industries mainly because they have official, objective systems for recognizing ratified published standards for skills and competencies in their fields – lawyers must pass the bar exams, medical professionals have a whole system of training and board certification, those professing religious orders must follow a strict course of education and personal development, and teachers must meet intellectual and technical tests of their abilities. Of course, we do recognize professionalism as a more generalized aspect or attitude: we use the term routinely to indicate a devotion to one's craft as a vocation rather than just a job. And we all also know, from unfortunate personal experience, that there are doctors and teachers and lawyers and clergy out there who may have the title but who are quite capable of acting in an unprofessional manner. Nevertheless, most of us would hesitate to go to a doctor without board certification, and we might not take kindly to our schools hiring teachers with no degree or training in education. Professional standards, if professionally enforced, at least give us a bottom line.

That may be why we've seen a proliferation of “professionalization” in many industries over the past ten years: not just obvious skill-based activities like plumbing and architecture, but travel agents, human resources managers, chefs, massage therapists, computer geeks, beauticians, and athletic trainers all may have framed certificates on their office walls indicating that they have certain skills and competencies, however minor or however laxly overseen. The value we put on these pieces of paper varies,

usually from slim to none. But they do indicate something, even the silliest of them: a commitment to one's field; a devotion to one's job; an eagerness to improve one's skills; a sense of pride in what one does. Their recipients have had enough confidence in their work to hold it up to someone else's scrutiny. And frankly I would rather work with those sorts of people, even if they're only painting my toenails.

Many of us have had the experience of having an editor say, why should I hire you? What are an indexer's professional credentials? What sort of objective standards can I use to evaluate the work you do? And ASI as an organization gets the same response sometimes when we try public advocacy: why should we listen to an organization that does not have set professional standards for its members or its product? We all know the answers to these questions. We point to our experience and past successes, to things like the Wilson Award criteria. And these are good answers, no doubt about it. And yet, and yet. My magic bullet is, "I have a PhD." No matter that I've been asked to index a book on neuroscience and my degree is in 15th century English socio-economics. The fact, the cold hard objective fact, of an advanced degree is a clinching factor, even when maybe it shouldn't be. All these things have lead me, reluctantly, to consider seriously whether some form of professional accreditation for indexers might be the way to go, if we can do it right.

Why NOT standards? A Lesson from Dante

But there are also good reasons why we shouldn't have standards, from the frivolous to the serious (and yes, a frivolous reason may still be a good reason, at least in my book). Dorothy L. Sayers, who many of you know as the author of the Lord Peter Whimsey mysteries, was also a respected scholar of the 18th century with a special interest in the plays of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Relatively late in life she decided to undertake the translation of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*. People were quite shocked. She had no degree in Italian; her specialty was not Italian literature; it was a medieval rather than an early modern work and therefore well out of her period of expertise; there was no connection of influence or imitation to her acknowledged specialty, Sheridan. (In fact, Dante was not much admired in the 18th century – Harold Walpole called him "extravagant, absurd, disgusting, in short a Methodist parson in Bedlam.") When asked what had possessed her to undertake this difficult and demanding task without any obvious "professional" qualifications, Sayers replied that she had a Masters in liberal arts from the University of Oxford, and as far as she was aware, that was supposed to prepare one to do just about anything. And she turned out a glorious translation, true to the beautiful *terza rima* construction of the original, which remained the standard from the publication of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* between 1949 and 1962 until Sisson's unrhymed verse version of 1980. Hers is almost certainly the version you studied in school.

I LOVE Sayer's reply. I revere the British tradition of the inspired amateur. I LOVE the idea that a good liberal arts education prepares one to do just about anything. I BELIEVE in that idea. And for me personally, I think that's one of the biggest reasons why the notion of the professionalization of indexing continues to bother me. I've seen too many

good vocations go down that path. When I was a sophomore in college with an interdisciplinary major in medieval studies my advisor asked me about my professional aspirations, and I mentioned that I was interested in museum work. He told me it was “already too late” for that; these days museum curators had to have a major in art history and an internship under their belts “at my age.” I was a SOPHOMORE! I was 19 years old! The same thing has happened to a number of vocations in which I have participated or been interested in at one point or another: archival work, librarianship, archaeology, and palaeoanthropology are all fields once dominated by interdisciplinarians with broad fields of interest and no specialized training. Professionalization has in many ways improved practice in these fields; but today people like Louis Leakey, the discoverer of *Zinjanthropus* and the Olduvai toolkit, and Flinders Petrie, who figured out how to use pottery to date sites accurately, might be working at MacDonaldis along with other liberal arts rejects.

I don't want this to happen to indexing. One of the great things about indexing is how it rewards the dabbler, the polymath, the person who's interested in everything. I've been working on this idea of “a moral philosophy of indexing” for while, and I've figured out that one of the things I like best about indexing and indexers is this quality, this ability to embrace all the knowledge in the world (or most of it – I still hate math) in the process of trying to organize it. It speaks to a great generosity of spirit, an intellectual *liberalitas*, that many endeavors lack. Too much insistence on meeting standards can suck the soul out of a vocation.

Another, related reason for rejecting the idea of standards, and this one is personal for many of us, is that we're all sick of taking tests. This is an example of a good but perhaps frivolous reason. Most of us (according to surveys) have at least two degrees, and a good many of us have three or even more. We're all vastly over-educated already. We know that lots of the tests we've taken have merely indicated that we're good at taking tests. If I have to subject myself to another test, it'd better be a very good one that actually proves something. This is another way of saying that if we're going to instigate professional standards it'd better mean more than those business management certificates indicating that the recipient slept through a four-hour course on Windows 95.

Which leads me to another set of objections, litigatory and administrative: is ASI ready to handle what a professional standards program would involve? Do we have the time and the money and the people and the expertise to keep such a program running smoothly and effectively? Are we ready to face potential litigation over any decisions such a program might enforce? After all, we are talking about people's livelihoods here. Approval or denial of accreditation could affect the ability to get work and get a decent rate of pay – and if it doesn't what is it worth and what does it signify? If we're going to do it, we have to do it properly, and we can't do that if we don't have the resources to run the program effectively.

One comment I've heard several times is that the whole idea of accreditation just seems “Un-American.” I guess the idea is that standards smacks of creating a privileged class. I don't hold with that particular argument. Meritocracy is a good old-fashioned American

value system. Recognition of excellence in the field is a good thing. But what's important, then, is making sure the process is truly meritocratic: not based on idiosyncratic ideas of what makes a good index, or partisanship, or the old-girls network. Any professional standards program would have to address scrupulously issues of fairness and objectivity.

Which brings me to my final and perhaps most important point about why we maybe shouldn't have standards: we all know there is a highly subjective aspect, an artistry, to creating a good index. How does one develop and enforce objective standards for a subjective discipline? We do, of course, evaluate indexes all the time – our own, for one thing, as we go through the editing process. Most of us have at least some rules we try to follow in constructing a good index. We have the Wheatley Medal and Wilson Award criteria to work from. There are lots and lots of indexing evaluation criteria for editors floating around out there, though many of these are not exactly comprehensive and fall into the “good enough” realm of review. Many of you are aware that there is a Web-based peer review system whereby you can submit your finished index to other indexers for comments.

But we're also all well aware that in applying these criteria we frequently break the rules. What works in one discipline or type of book may be a total failure in another. The peculiar requirements of one text may lead to a radical re-evaluation of our indexing approach. And we all know how easy it is to pick up a book and be hypercritical of the indexing approach taken – until we start looking at the book and the problems it poses, until we start wondering about the time and space the indexer had to work with, and the weird requirements possibly posed by the editor, author, or publishing house. So if we're going to have objective professional standards, we have to make a choice: do we go with a set of criteria so basic they don't really judge more than the most low-level competency? Or do we create highly detailed, nuanced, and comprehensive requirements – that take so much time to apply, and are so fraught with subjectivity, that we may have real problems administering the program?

“Well,” I imagine most of you are thinking rather testily at this point, “does she want standards or not?” The thing is, I'm not sure. I'm not proposing that we instigate standards and I'm not suggesting that we ditch the idea finally and forever. My modest proposal is that we talk about it, in such a way that we can keep the discussion open-ended and exploratory. To help with that discussion I'd like to give you a brief analysis of the British and Australian standards programs.

SI's Accreditation and Registration Programs

My remarks on the British system are based on several things: my attendance at the accreditation and registration workshop held at SI's summer 2000 national conference in Cambridge, England; use of SI's published material on the accreditation and registration program on their Website; and my own experience as an indexer living in the UK in the 1980s, when accreditation and registration were introduced. I've never been an SI member, did not apply for accreditation or registration myself, and certainly have never

been privy to the inner deliberations that shaped SI's standards program, so this is only one perspective. Any SI members present, I'd be delighted if you can provide another view of the system when we move to open discussion.

SI has a two-tiered method of professional recognition. SI members, to whom both tiers are restricted, first apply for accreditation. SI's directory states that accreditation "indicates that the member has shown theoretical and practical competence by completing the Society's open learning qualification" – i.e., it's recognition of the successful completion of a course of training. Open learning is an at-home, at-your-own-pace tutorial system not dissimilar to the USDA indexing course methodology. SI itself administers a training course of five core units containing practical exercises and self-administered tests (the units are entitled "documents, authors, users, indexers"; "choice and form of entries"; "arrangement and presentation of indexes"; "information sources and reference tools"; and "the business of indexing"). There are also some additional units covering specialized topics in practice and in development. The society provides tutorial support and also formal tests for each unit. Successful completion of the course leads to accreditation. SI members who have already taken another course, or are self-taught, may purchase and complete the formal test papers to achieve accreditation. The five basic test papers cost \$56 each, so accreditation requires an outlay of at least \$280, not including the cost of completing the training units. At the beginning of the accreditation program quite a few experienced indexers were grandfathered into the system without having to take the tests, but now pretty much everybody who wants accreditation must go through the formal process. A large number of SI members have applied for and obtained accreditation. Unsuccessful applicants must wait a minimum of three months before retaking a failed examination.

The second tier of professional recognition in the UK is registration. The SI directory defines registered indexer status as indicating "that the member's experience and competence in indexing for publishers and other clients has been recognized and approved by the Society's Registration assessment procedure." To apply for registration, one must be accredited or have taken the Book Indexing Postal Tutorials (BIPT) course, which is regarded as the equivalent of having passed the society's own training. There is a £100 charge (about \$175) for the application, which is nonrefundable. The application requires submission of an index (which may be a published, commissioned work or independently undertaken), completion of a questionnaire about the index indicating any special circumstances involved, and references from two clients. Relatively few members have applied for and obtained registered status.

The SI program is administered by a board of assessors that meet twice a year; they rely on an outer panel of specialists to evaluate certain indexes. They have a procedure for dealing with complaints about the system and for people requesting a review of their denial of accreditation or registration. SI is currently considering a continuing professional development requirement; you can read a white paper on this subject on the SI Website.

SI has been the guinea pig for professional standards for all the other societies; they plunged in where we feared to tread, and we should give them credit for taking on such a very difficult task. Inevitably, they have had growing pains. The critiques that follow are comments I have gleaned from my own experience working as an indexer in England, and from free and frank comments about the system by UK indexers and publishers both inside and outside of SI.

I lived in the UK from 1977 to 1989. I indexed around 15 texts per year for all but the final year, so I did a substantial amount of indexing but I certainly wasn't fulltime – I was finishing up my studies, working as a lecturer, an archivist, and an etymologist, and eventually as a freelance editor in my last year, when I did a lot more indexes. I first became aware of the standards system in the latter 80s. Publishers with whom I was working began to ask about it. I worked with a fairly small group of clients, so I don't think my not being registered or accredited actually lost me any jobs, but editors several times used it as a means of negotiating my rates down. If I had chosen to stay in the UK, I certainly would have joined SI and applied for accreditation and eventually registration. I don't know what the costs were then, but I was making around £200 for a standard index to a 250-page scholarly monograph, so I would have been able to pay for both with a couple of jobs. Participation in the program is not cheap, but it's not prohibitively expensive for a working indexer either. It was clear to me that, with these systems in place, there was a Darwinian force at work. Proponents of standards sometimes argue that one doesn't have to participate in a professional recognition program, but that's not really true. If it has any meaning at all, it's bound to impact your business.

Some of the indexers I knew were bitterly opposed to the accreditation/registration program and had even left SI because of it. My impression now is that it is not nearly so much the bone of contention it was at first, but it was a divisive issue at one point for the Society. Three basic complaints dominated. It took a long time to get the paperwork through and get one's accreditation or registration, and that could be a problem when clients were asking about one's status. There were initially some administrative problems; one person told me her application was lost twice. But the biggest and most frequent complaint I heard about involved registration, and the perceived subjectivity involved in the judging process. People claimed that they were rejected for idiosyncratic reasons outside the usual objective criteria for indexing and without consideration being taken for the peculiar demands of the subject, time allowed, or editorial requirements. (By now requesting details about the index I think SI has addressed some of these concerns.) As I understand from talking to UK indexers and to people on the board of assessors now, these initial problems have been resolved and the system really works pretty smoothly. But we need to pay attention to these difficulties nevertheless, because if we want to introduce a professional standards program to ASI, we'd like to avoid as many pitfalls as we can.

The AusSI Registration Program

The Australian Society of Indexers' registration program is more simple administratively, but in some ways more rigorous than the UK system. I must stress that I do not have as

much information about, or any personal experience with, the AusSI system. However, I have talked with several AusSI members and researched their published materials. The AusSI Website has a very clear page devoted to registration criteria and procedure.

AusSI registration “records those members of the Society whose practical ability in the compilation of indexes has been assessed and formally recognized by the Society as of professional standard.” A panel of assessors establishes criteria and judges applications for registration; the panel may co-opt already-registered indexers to assist with the assessment of submissions. Applicants for registration must be members of the Australian Society of Indexers. They must submit both an index and the text indexed; the index should be “substantial” in size (a minimum of four pages) and of such a complexity as to require “more than one category of words or phrases as entries.” The index preferably should be to a published work, but may be prepared specifically for the purpose of the application. The indexer should also submit detailed notes about conditions or constraints on the index. In addition, potential registrants must submit details of at least two additional published indexes; in other words, registration cannot be dependent upon a first work. Applicants pay \$40 Australian on submission. Results are usually supplied within three months. Unsuccessful applicants may re-apply after a six month period. AusSI makes assurances as to the confidentiality of the procedures and only keeps permanent records of the panel’s adjudications and successful applications.

AusSI registration criteria are clearly laid out and published on the Website, and covers content analysis, descriptive usage, comprehensiveness of the index, arrangement of terms (alphabetical, chronological, etc.), stylistic considerations, and a category called “processing,” which includes accuracy of page references, correct use of cross-references, and lack of spelling errors. AusSI is also currently considering a specialist form of registration for database indexers.

Some of the advantages of the AusSI system – points I think they’ve learned from observing the British system, at least in part – are that they have a tighter timeframe for approval; it’s a simpler one-tier program (but then they don’t run a training program, which is one of the major activities of SI); their criteria are fairly rigorous, clearly spelled out, and available to anyone online; and the cost is extremely reasonable. I don’t have much information about member satisfaction with the system; if any AusSI members are present I’d be happy to hear about your impressions of your own professional standards program during the open discussion period.

Where Do We Go From Here?

So where do we – ASI – go from here? Can we build on the experiences of AusSI and SI or do we start over from scratch? I want to reiterate, this is a very modest proposal. I just want people to think openly about the pluses and minuses of having official, professional standards, without trying to force any sort of closure one way or the other. Here are some of the questions I think we’ll need to consider before we make any sort of decision.

Do we “grandfather in” people who’ve been indexing for yonks and who might legitimately resent being asked to prove their abilities afresh? What would the criteria for being grandfathered require?

Is a one-tier, two-tier, or three-tier (classwork, index submission, specialty fields) system preferable?

Do we have the administrative resources – time, money, people, expertise – to handle this sort of program in a disinterested and timely fashion?

Should there be certain “automatic” acceptance procedures for certain stages of registration (such as passing the USDA course)?

What is the best way to objectively assess indexing abilities? Is submission of an index to be judged by a clear set of criteria the best way, or is some sort of formal essay test a better way to judge peoples’ indexing abilities objectively?

Should we attach experiential requirements to the accreditation process? Should people have to be in the business for a required minimum time, or to have completed a minimum number of projects, or to have a certain minimum amount of training?

How do we judge the judges? Australia’s panel of assessors are picked by the AusSI equivalent of our board of directors; I’m not sure how SI picks its assessors. How do we make sure to avoid an overly-incestuous panel, and/or the appearance of a closed club?

What are the aims of establishing a professional standards program? How do we think it will help our members, further the cause of quality indexing, and aid our clients in finding and using good indexers? Any accreditation system needs a mission and a vision to work.

Should accreditation be a one-off, once-and-for-all-time process, or should we require an annual continuing education credit, as medical and legal professionals must meet?

Finally, how do we preserve the artistic qualities, the inherent subjectivity, of an index whilst basing our judgments on objective criteria? In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allen Poe wrote, “There is no beauty that does not have something of strangeness in it.” As some of you know, one of my favorite sculptors is Paul DeSomma, a California artist who makes glass sculptures of male nudes seemingly rescued from the depths of the sea after centuries of abandonment. Barnacled, broken-armed, sometimes less than perfect representations of male pulchritude, it is their very weirdness that makes them so beautiful. As Shakespeare says, they have undergone “...a sea change/into something rich and strange.” All good indexes have a strangeness to them, a uniqueness reflecting the special qualities of the texts they represent. If we develop professional standards, can we help them to serve that strangeness, that beauty, rather than stamp it out?

I don't expect we'll be answering any or all of these questions any time soon. Our indexes are our poor children, and I don't want to see them devoured. All I hope to do is get a dialogue started. It's just a modest proposal.