

Miles O. Price and Education for Law Librarianship

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Education for law librarianship is one of the areas in which Miles O. Price made a major contribution to his profession. Librarians know better than others that the teaching process can operate in a variety of ways, and Professor Price's educational activity certainly covered a very wide range—bibliographic writing and scholarship, law school lectures, professional meetings and forums, training of his own library staff, and direct personal contacts with other law librarians, particularly novices. Perhaps the most important thrust of this educational contribution, however, was the course in law librarianship that he initiated at the Columbia University School of Library Service in the summer session of 1937. It has been offered on a regular basis every other summer thereafter.¹ Meeting daily during that six-week session, the course was a pioneer offering, although perhaps not the very first of its kind. In describing it, I shall try wherever possible to use Mr. Price's own words² and thereby give a flavor of his style. Since each teacher's style shapes his contribution, a memorial that differentiates Miles Price's unique educational role from that of all others may be most appropriate.

It is difficult to describe why the Columbia course was so effective in shaping the development of law librarianship during the 25 years it was offered, but its impact cannot be doubted. Negative factors undoubtedly existed for the students: Mr. Price was a dry lecturer and made little attempt to glamorize or dramatize his materials; the course was traditionally given in the very early morning in an atmosphere of sleepy heat and physical discomfort; the assignments were long and tedious, and the total work required made the course one of the most demanding in the library school. Despite these factors, it was for its many students a landmark

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¹ For the formal announcement of the opening of the course, see 30 *LLJ* 29 (1936). The background of the course is described in C. C. Williamson, "Plans for the Training of Law Librarians at Columbia University," 30 *LLJ* 261 (1937).

² The major source for his comments is Price, "Columbia University's Law Library Course," 55 *LLJ* 220 (1962).

in their professional development and an educational experience of the deepest importance. The reason for that influence must lie somewhere in the pedagogical skill, wisdom, and personality of Miles O. Price.

The tone of the course reflected the teacher's personality. Mr. Price described it as follows:

Informality coupled with hard work, has been the rule from the first. The classes have been small—the largest about twenty-five students and the average about fifteen—permitting a seminar or tutorial approach. The relation of instructor to students has always been close . . .³

In terms of content, approximately three-quarters of the sessions were devoted to legal bibliography and about one-quarter to problems of law library administration. Convinced that the law librarian's greatest need was a thorough knowledge of legal bibliography, he described his intent as follows:

The primary object of this course is to lay a sound foundation for reference service in a law library, necessarily including both the proper selection, acquisition and cataloging of law books, and their use in answering the varied questions presented to the law librarian. Familiarity with the basic techniques of library work is presumed, and these will therefore be touched upon only in so far as they differ in a law library from the norm. No knowledge of law or law books is presumed, though the possession of such knowledge is an obvious advantage.⁴

That the main focus was certainly on the librarian's reference function can be seen in this later comment:

The emphasis, over the years, has been placed, more and more, upon preparing the students to do reference work in a law library, which is, after all, the ultimate function of the law library.⁵

³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴ Price, Miles O. *Syllabus for the Study of Law Library Administration*. 2d ed. New York: School of Library Science, Columbia University, 1946. P. 1.

⁵ 55 *LLJ* 221.

Mr. Price viewed the law librarian's reference work as having a somewhat special dimension by virtue of the materials with which he worked and the needs of his readers. In the *Syllabus* he described that difference as follows:

The law librarian must not only know what the users' problems are and the books they need to solve them, but must be able to realize the possibilities of these books himself; he must not only be able to appraise critically sources and aids to their use (and legal material is the most completely indexed of all, probably), but he must be able to appraise the final result—has he enabled his patrons to find real "authority"? This means that he must develop not only a knowledge of his subject matter and its use, but also accuracy and a critical ability as well.⁶

The total impact of his Columbia course might be described in three aspects: (1) The professional standards of bibliographic expertise and administrative concern, which were central to his pedagogy; (2) the instructional literature in law librarianship, which was developed in the presentation of the course; and (3) the impact of the many individuals who went through the course and then became professional influences in their own right, spreading their own versions of the original teaching.

Being based in large part on a detailed presentation of the materials of legal bibliography, the course was designed first and foremost to impart to its students a detailed knowledge of legal sources and the methods of legal research. I think this was what Mr. Price considered his most important contribution, based on the conviction that, whatever else they were, law librarians must be expert in legal bibliography. This knowledge was to be conveyed in three forms: In lectures, in the readings, and in a heavy dose of library exercises. He described that multiple approach as follows:

Here were the three aspects of teaching:

- (1) "You have read about this";
- (2) "I am telling you about it now";
- and (3) "You are doing it yourself."⁷

The method undoubtedly worked. What the student may have lost during the lectures, he might be expected to pick up from reading the detailed expositions in *Effective Legal Research*.

⁶ *Syllabus*. P. 1.

⁷ 55 *LLJ* 222.

If a student were so unfortunate as to miss the lesson in its oral or written version, he could not avoid the third impact when faced with a library problem demanding close attention and an answer to be submitted for marking. For those students who followed the lecture and read the book, the problems were undoubtedly much easier—but never a snap! Without recall from the lecture or reading, however, the problems went much more slowly; and the impact was felt more deeply. The full significance of these written assignments is described in the following comment from the *Syllabus*:

Problem work should be prepared as though it were being handed to a lawyer, with steps described when necessary, and full, accurate information given, sufficient for the recipient to act upon. This is really the most important part of the course, and not only the correctness of the solutions but the method of presentation will be considered in grading the student. The mastery of the technique of so presenting legal and other data to the ultimate user, be he practitioner, professor, student, or layman, that he can act on them without further checking or elaboration by himself or the librarian, is vitally important to good service.⁸

There can be little question that the really distinctive characteristics of a law librarian stem from those unique traits of the bibliography in which he is expert. Whether in acquisition or cataloging or reference work, Miles O. Price's course brought to the law librarian a knowledge of his materials and a concern for precision in their use. This concern pervaded his own librarianship, his writing and professional activities, and certainly his teaching. He was also convinced that law librarians had to learn how lawyers themselves functioned in order to understand their problems and to help them better. The *Syllabus* referred to the importance of this understanding as follows:

The student is urged to read carefully the material cited on content and method of use of law books; the more nearly he learns to approach the "lawyer process," the more successful he will be. This involves the appraisal of facts; the application of the net situation to the finding of sources and aids; the critical examination of what is found; and the presentation of the result

⁸ *Syllabus*. P. 3.

to the inquirer, personally or in writing. This course does not attempt to teach the student to present a memorandum of law, but he should be able, as a law librarian, to present one of the literature of the law. This requires knowledge of the material, care in its selection, and accuracy of presentation, including citation. It requires a well selected and well cataloged library as well.⁹

In connection with the Columbia program, Mr. Price and his colleagues developed a number of teaching materials whose influence transcended their original purpose. The first of these was the *Syllabus for the Study of Law Library Administration* (School of Library Service, Columbia University, 1st ed. 1937; 2d ed. 1946), referred to above. The *Syllabus* provided the central reading focus for the course during its early period. After going through two editions and some 15 years of use, it was finally abandoned in favor of *Effective Legal Research*, which he wrote with Harry Bitner.¹⁰ Although it did not arise directly from the Columbia course, *Effective Legal Research* undoubtedly received considerable impetus from the students' need for a detailed reading. Upon its publication in 1953, it promptly assumed that role.

There were other publications, however, that stemmed more directly from the needs of his Columbia Library School students. In several areas of administration to which extensive attention could not be given, it was necessary to offer supplementary materials. These included Elsie Basset's pamphlet, *Cataloging Practices in the Columbia University Law Library*, which was later expanded into her influential book, *A Cataloging Manual for Law Books* (H. W. Wilson, 1942). Related to those works was the attempt to provide a model catalog to guide students in learning the techniques of legal cataloging. *A Catalog for a Law Library of 15,000 Volumes*¹¹ was thus published to provide illustrations of the many cataloging problems which might arise in a medium-sized law library. Mr. Price stated his hopes for the broader influence of that guide as follows:

The model catalog for the law library of about 15,000 volumes, from which this

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Little, Brown, 1953. Subsequently, in 1962, the *Student Edition Revised* was published.

¹¹ School of Library Service, Columbia University, 1942.

volume was reproduced, was compiled in the Columbia University Law Library to satisfy the demonstrated need of many law librarians and catalogers for a tool which would enable them to construct for their own libraries a catalog in accordance with standard cataloging practice. It is intended to serve as a working model for the untrained person undertaking law cataloging, and in it the aim has been to provide numerous examples of every kind of publication which will be found in the law library, so that when a like publication is acquired by the library using the model catalog, a few seconds will show just how it should be cataloged. It is hoped that among the examples in the catalog will be found the solution of every point which baffles the cataloger of the small law library or of law books in any library.¹²

Coming at the end of the course, Mr. Price's two lectures on acquisitions were frequently so full of specific information and so rushed in presentation that he decided to ease the students' note-taking by providing their substance in written form. The mimeographed manual, *Order Work in a Law Library* (Columbia University School of Library Service, 1941), was the result. When faced, years later, with the need for such a brief survey, I was amazed at how well that presentation stood up. Despite a generation of new developments in legal publishing and law book distribution, the soundness of its general advice is still relevant 30 years later.

These teaching materials aided not only the students who used them, but also other teachers of law librarianship who were to teach at Columbia and other library schools in the future.

The graduates of the course themselves form an outstanding group in law librarianship and have had great professional influence. With justifiable pride Mr. Price described this impact as follows:

... if its "alumni" present at any annual meeting of the A.A.L.L. were to walk out, it would create a large and important hole. Geographically, these alumni extend from Canada to China; from New York to California; from Montana to Texas. As of the 1960/61 directory of law libraries, twenty-nine law school libraries were then headed by them and an additional fifteen had been at one time or another. Twenty-three state or bar libraries and a host of government

¹² *Ibid.*, preface.

departmental libraries have either been headed by alumni or alumni have been staff members. Law firm and business law libraries have been well represented; at one time, every organized insurance company librarian in the New York metropolitan area was one of my people, and most of them still are. Four alumni later became Presidents of the A.A.L.L.¹³

The course was open, not only to the regular students of the Columbia Library School, but also to persons who were not qualified to matriculate for the library school's degree, provided they had some experience in law librarianship and were able to show that they could successfully carry the course with some benefit to themselves. This flexibility was established at Mr. Price's urging and enabled many talented law librarians who lacked formal prerequisites to improve their skills and their positions. It was typical of his democratic and pragmatic approach to such problems.

Rarely has one man had so great an opportunity to shape developments in his chosen field. That contribution reflected the influences of his predecessors, his contemporaries, and even his students. Certainly he didn't view the educational process as a one-way street. He acknowledged his debt to Frederick C. Hicks and other leaders of law librarianship, as well as to his immediate colleagues, Harry Bitner, Elsie Basset, Florence Zagayko, Meira Pimsleur, Myron Jacobstein, and many others on the Columbia staff. His own influence was perhaps enhanced by a peculiar combination of fierce personal and professional pride on one hand and a sincerely simple humility, self-depreca-

tion, and small town innocence on the other. The personality of Miles O. Price was a mass of inconsistencies and contradictions that made him at once a challenge to the understanding and a fascination to those who knew him well. His educational impact on law librarianship may have been at once impeded and enhanced by the different facets of his complex personality, but its importance as a positive shaping force in modern law librarianship can never be doubted. He set the standards that guided the profession in his generation, the generation that follows, and perhaps generations to come.

If one were to measure the stature of Miles O. Price, the teacher, by any standards of pedagogic excellence, his great contribution would be apparent. Gilbert Highet in his book, *The Art of Teaching*,¹⁴ lists among the *qualities* of a good teacher, knowing and liking the subject and knowing and liking the pupils. Miles O. Price had great knowledge and great affection for both his material and his students. Professor Highet then described the *abilities* of a good teacher as encompassing memory, willpower, and kindness. Miles O. Price was richly endowed with each of these three qualities as well. Finally, Highet set forth the three general *principles* of effective teaching for everyone—clarity, patience, and responsibility. Our teacher met these standards also. Miles O. Price was *clear*—"as firm as stone and as bright as sunlight." He was *patient*—appreciating the truth that "anything worth learning takes time to learn, and time to teach." And he was *responsible*—knowing that "it is a serious thing to interfere with another man's life."¹⁵

¹⁴ Vintage Books, 1958.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.

¹³ 55 LLJ 223.