Planning a Master’s Program in Publishing

Rowland Lorimer

The Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing at Simon Fraser University is about to admit its first students. This article describes the founding of the Centre and the evolution of its curriculum. In its present form, the curriculum combines advice from the industry and the academic requirements of the university.

The purpose of this article is to provide an interpretation of the development of the credit education program of the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing, with specific emphasis on the development of the master’s program. It includes a discussion of what we think are the necessary elements of a master’s program in publishing.

Credit Courses and the Founding of the Centre

In 1984, at Simon Fraser University, only one credit course in publishing existed. It was an overview of the Canadian industry offered within the communication Department that I had been teaching since 1974. In the 1980s Ann Cowan began to develop noncredit courses in writing and publishing. Sensing that publishing was an area of potential expansion, and with support for that opinion confirmed by Tony Gregson, then executive director of the Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia, Ann Cowan obtained a grant from the federal Department of Communications to study the feasibility of creating a national center for studies in publishing with the later-articulated mandate “to strengthen, support and encourage development in the publishing industry and the book trade in Canada, taking into account other forms of publishing such as periodicals and non-print media which form the context of book publishing in an information society.” Immediately she set about creating local and national working committees to provide advice. These committees were composed of industry members and academics with a scholarly interest in publishing. Because I am the academic at Simon Fraser most concerned with publishing, Ann and I almost immediately formed a working partnership and shared responsibilities for the development of the Centre from this point forward.

The Centre was conceived from a mixture of attitudes. On the one hand there was a sense of affirmation of an identifiable community of publishers.
and writers in Canada who had emerged as significant cultural players in the past two decades. There was also recognition of the robust economic health of a few larger Canadian companies and many foreign companies operating in Canada. Our primary focus was on trade publishing, and our affirmation was directed to the writers and publishers who have created a fictional and documentary discourse about Canada and from Canadians over the past two decades. The creation of the Centre would give further recognition and assistance to them and the role they have come to play.

But the Centre was also conceived from a sense of siege. Writers and their publishers in Canada, as elsewhere, are recognized as making a highly important contribution to the life of the nation. However, the legal and market foundations of book publishing are insufficient to grant either group appropriate economic status except when they reach the point of stardom or when their writings and publications are market-driven.

The Centre and each of its three major thrusts—research, education, and public awareness—was part of a larger effort to address this cultural and economic disjunction. (That larger effort includes the support of programs of the federal and all provincial governments for the book-publishing industry.) In research, the first priority was to describe accurately the nature of the industry. First we would deal with basics: size, structure, average sales and profit levels, levels of imports and exports, industry trends, and so forth. With accurate basic information, the Centre might then investigate price flexibility within a market dominated by imports, potential and requirements for growth, emerging profitable markets and product forms, or the workings of recognized and unrecognized subsidiary markets. With regard to the latter case, in the creation and utilization of information, interesting anomalies exist. Although film makers pay for the rights to make movies based on published novels, mass-market periodicals often, with no royalty payment, repackage ideas that have gained acceptance through book publication. Copyright law and its enforcement play a major role in this seeming inconsistency. The Centre could also investigate the barriers to global publishing or propose and assist in implementing catalysts to global marketing arrangements equivalent to those available to global publishers.

Similarly, the educational programs were conceived from a sense of the important cultural value of the industry but its lack of economic health. In many industries, for example resource-based industries, a substantial contribution is made to economic health by the education system. The education system provides skilled and educated workers for those industries, taking on a major percentage of the training costs they might otherwise bear. It does the same for our health system. In publishing, a general education and a high level of literacy are of the utmost value and basic to consumer demand. However, the specific skills and understandings necessary for running the industry are generally learned on the job.

Our educational plan for the Centre was to begin to professionalize this cultural/information industry in Canada. It was our view that in doing so we