representing the Society at events of other organizations certainly develops personal skills.

This began with *Woman's Hour*, and a couple of years ago it came full circle, when a book I had indexed was shortlisted for the Wheatley Medal. I attended the reception before the awards ceremony, and the guest speaker was a broadcaster I admire greatly – Jenni Murray from *Woman's Hour*. There must be as many different ways of developing an indexing career as there are indexers, but this is my story.

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Diary of a trainee indexer, February 2003–May 2005

Rohan Bolton

The third edition of the Society of Indexers (SI) distance-learning training course was introduced in 2002. This diary gives a personal account of one individual's experiences as she works her way through the course, attends training seminars and finally achieves Accreditation. It covers some of the problems encountered and offers hints on how she prepared for the world of professional indexing.

New Year's Day 2003

I have been working as a part-time researcher for a web-based European information service for the past five years. Now that my teenage daughter is becoming more independent I find that I have more time on my hands, so I have decided that this is the year that I will train as a professional indexer in order to expand my work opportunities. Here goes!

February 2003 – Unit A

I choose the paper version of the Society of Indexers (SI) training course as I cannot imagine being able to learn directly from the computer screen. In retrospect I wish I had applied for the CD-ROM version as I soon become accustomed to studying and working directly off my screen. (In fact, I understand that a combined version of CD-ROM and printed booklets is now the standard version.)

The day the first unit arrives in the post I can't wait to open the package and see what I've let myself in for. At a first glance it looks pretty logical and straightforward. As I read through the early stages I have the impression that with a background in librarianship I am going to find the Accreditation process relatively simple. With hindsight the phrase 'pride comes before a fall' comes to mind!

I enjoy the challenge of the exercises in the self-administered test, which include researching American spellings and finding errors in the printed extracts, which I find very satisfying.

The descriptions in Chapter 6 of how individual indexers compile their indexes are particularly fascinating, and it is this that begins to give me cause for concern. How does one ever manage to distil a full-length narrative book into a manageable index?

My aim is to finish the unit before Easter, and I complete Test Paper A within a week – before the end of the allotted three weeks' completion time. To prepare the index I use the 'Tables' function in Word with two columns, sorting the first column of subject terms alphabetically with the second having the locators. I do not feel ready to embark on any of the tailor-made indexing software programs.

Much to my relief I receive news before Easter that I have passed; as my index was described as a 'fair attempt at a first index', I feel reasonably confident about continuing.

April 2003 – Unit B

I had applied for the Unit B booklet at the same time as sending off my first paper for marking, so after Easter I settle down to Unit B, which I hope to finish during the summer term.

I find the identification of 'classes of indexable concepts' challenging, which makes me realize for the first time that there is an important intellectual component to the preparation of an index, not just the need for technical consistency and accuracy.

I like the logic behind the use of cross-references. Having been involved with the compilation of a political thesaurus when I was at the House of Commons Library, I can relate

to the concepts of hierarchies and related and subordinate terms as they translate into *see* and *see also* references and subheadings.

The rules for dealing with proper names seem extremely complex, and I am sure I will be forever referring back to the textbooks as I can't imagine being able to memorize them.

Although I have missed a lot of the possible index terms in the self-administered tests I decide that I am ready to go for the next formal test, which seems to go well.

It has taken me five months to complete the first two units.

September 2003 – Unit C

Unit C is my project for the autumn term, and this is the section that brings me up short. I find it very difficult to master the rules for filing order. My brain begins to fog with the effort of understanding the difference in letter-by-letter and word-by-word order, and also the rules for indexing terms beginning with the same element. I would really have appreciated some more exercises for this. Much later I discover the excellent Indexstudents.com website which has a selection of practice exercises for term selection and index evaluation.

I make good use of the rules outlined in the two British Standards (BS 1749:1985 and BS ISO 999:1996) which I bought earlier in the course. It reminds me of the 'cat and class' part of my librarianship degree at Leeds Polytechnic in the 1970s, which I seem to remember required a similarly analytical approach.

I feel the questions relating to filing rules to be my main weakness, which means that while doing the test paper for this unit I spend too much time concentrating on this; redoing these questions several times meant that I didn't check the rest of the paper as thoroughly as I should have done.

It does cross my mind that if I tackle one of the free indexing software downloads much of the sorting will be done automatically. I reject this as I feel that I really need to understand the rules, rather than let a pre-programmed machine do the work, and I am also nervous about these automated indexing programs. I realize later that I should have tried out some of these programs. I could have saved so much time on the display and layout of my indexes on Units C and D. I must have spent hours working on the exact spacing between the heading and the locators and between the lines of my indexes; only later do I realize that these can be done automatically by MACREX (and presumably other indexing software as well) and this also ensures that there are no spacing mistakes.

A few weeks later I am mortified to find that apparently I only passed this unit by a whisker, with among other faults 'errors in alphabetization, spelling, punctuation and spacing'. I had always prided myself on being extremely accurate, and I am quite shocked that I could have been so careless, which I find to have been the case when I look back at my test paper.

I also made a stupid slip-up with my thesaurus – changing a term at the last minute and then neglecting to change all of the relevant cross-references. That is one mistake I will never make again.

In the long run such a narrow squeak will probably make me a more careful indexer. I also feel somewhat comforted later in the year when there is much heated discussion on the SI-Trainee discussion list concerning difficulties that people are experiencing with the course.

I get my first experience of meeting other indexers at a London group meeting in October – a special meeting at which Janet Shuter is presented with the Carey Award for services to indexing, so there are a lot more members present than there would normally be at a regional meeting. I get the impression that they are all very erudite and knowledgeable, and although it is daunting I enjoy the mental stimulation of meeting real indexers.

January 2004

One year into the course, and I feel that I have made good progress – though I am surprised to read on the SI website that most trainee indexers complete the course within 9 to 12 months. Later I post a query on the SI-Trainee discussion list to see how long others are taking to complete the course. From this small sample the average time taken seems to be between three and four years. Few if any trainees seem to be working full-time towards Accreditation; most of the delays are attributed to work and family commitments.

I have decided to treat myself to a small indexing library, and buy Pat Booth's book on indexing (Booth, 2001) and some of the SI's Occasional Papers in the areas in which I hope to work eventually: children's books, biographies, and newspapers and magazines. Later on I bid on eBay for G. Norman Knight's book *Indexing, the art of* (Knight, 1979). The note sent to me by the seller tells me to look after it as 'it's very scarce and collectable'. Maybe I will make my fortune from this first edition rather than as an indexer.

February 2004 – Unit D

I am very impressed with the practical business content of this unit, especially its hands-on nature. When I started the course I was only expecting it to cover the technicalities of producing an index, as I had assumed that it would be my own responsibility to organize my indexing career. The hints on running a small business, taxation questions, and the practicalities of submitting quotes, writing publicity letters and taking calls from potential clients are all really useful. I particularly like the way that the questions are tailored to producing useful material for when I am finally in a position to look for work.

The test paper for this section is so time-consuming that I need to keep it till the very last moment, sending off the paper by Recorded Delivery. This reminds me of the trauma of keeping to deadlines when I was producing *Vacher's European Companion* at quarterly intervals, and I get a feel for how it will be when I am producing an index for a paid fee, with a real deadline. Again, this is a useful feature of the way the SI course has been planned.

March 2004 – workshops and annual conference

I decide that the next stage of my preparation should be to get away from my desk and meet some real indexers. I am fortunate in that I already work part-time from home and so am able to plan my working week to allow for training days in London.

As I work for a publisher I am able to claim the cost of these courses back from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The grant is paid once you have submitted an assessment report to the Publishing Training Centre, and I find the discipline of writing up this summary very useful – it helps me to remember and reinforce the main points covered during the day.

The first course I enrol for is Derek's Copson's workshop on 'Indexing biography and names'. The notes I take and the handouts on sources of information on foreign names are to come in useful later in the year when I am compiling the index for my Practical Indexing Assignment (PIA).

The annual conference in Chester is much more fun and interesting than I had expected it to be – an annual convention of indexers had sounded very dry to me when I first heard of it a couple of years ago. Sessions are relevant and interesting, and we newcomer 'Yellow Spots' (from the distinguishing yellow sticker on our name badges) are made to feel most welcome. Just as important is the opportunity to put names to faces and make new contacts. It also gives me added enthusiasm to hurry up and finish the course so I can do the real thing.

Summer 2004 – Practical Indexing Assignment (PIA)

The final hurdle before Accreditation is the completion of an index to a short book. During the summer I spend a lot of time thumbing through various books that I have been keeping in mind for this project, rejecting all of them. I reject one book on British prime ministers that I would really like to read in depth because I feel that since each chapter is on a different prime minister, it would not give me the chance to develop enough subject headings. I eliminate another book on 'grammar for parents' even though it badly needs an index, because I feel I probably don't know my English grammar in sufficient depth to produce a good index. This selection process makes me appreciate how important subject knowledge is in order to produce a competent index.

In the end I go for a book with a series of academic papers on the European Union, a compilation of essays from different authors from a think-tank. Looking to the future I am hoping that perhaps this organization will be interested in using me to compile professional indexes for its own publications, most of which appear without an index.

During the summer I attend Ann Hudson's workshop on 'Editing the index'. It is most enlightening and I feel much more confident about tackling the index for my PIA now. As well as the difficulty of deciding what should be indexed, I often have trouble choosing a suitably succinct term for the

concept. Ann also points out that equally important is to determine what is not needed; I have a tendency to put in too much information, which is apparently a common problem for beginners.

September 2004 – voluntary indexing project

A real piece of luck – at the end of September someone posts a message on SI-Trainee asking for a volunteer to compile an index to the Sussex Archaeological Society newsletter. I am lucky enough to be chosen for this – my first real project, to produce an index to three issues. Although it means yet another delay in the completion of my final assessment, I feel it is worth it in order to have something else to add to my CV. I grew up in Sussex and have always been interested in archaeology and ancient history. Once I settle down to it I finally begin to get a feel for how to go about the selection of terms. No amount of theory can replace the benefits of real-life experience, and preparing this index without payment and the time constraints of the professional publishing world is invaluable.

November 2004 – MACREX

The principle of 'learning by doing' also gives me the opportunity to iron out real-life queries on MACREX, my chosen software. I had initially made the mistake of trying to come to terms with all the refined options at once rather than just using the basics. Drusilla Calvert was endlessly patient with my long lists of problems, and I was very glad to have the time to sort out queries properly rather than having to rush. There was even enough time for Drusilla to organize a London workshop for about ten users, which was particularly useful. I took nine pages of notes and discovered a couple of vital functions that I hadn't picked up from the written manual. These included the existence of 'help screens' and the invaluable use of 'group search' for checking consistency of entries, which I had heard mentioned but hadn't come to terms with.

February 2005

I am finally ready to submit my PIA. I've spent quite a few weeks printing out my effort, reading and correcting it, and then reprinting it to repeat the process all over again. I realize that there is unlikely to be time to spend doing this for a commercial indexing assignment, but hope this will prove beneficial in the long term.

March 2005 – another workshop and my first peer review

While waiting for my PIA to be returned I go to the first SI workshop to be devoted to embedded indexing, with Bill Johncocks as tutor. It is a very practical course with all participants having their own computer, and I am pleased to find that by the end of the day I can successfully embed a few

index terms into a text that I have brought along with me.

I also go to my first peer review organized by the London group, where we discuss a chapter from an introductory textbook on law. Rather, I listen and various others discuss, which I find most enlightening. Once again, I learn a lot about what not to index.

May 2005 – Accreditation

Finally, I receive notification from the Sheffield office that I have passed the PIA and can call myself an Accredited Indexer. The marker's comments are encouraging but at the same time highlight one or two issues for consideration that will be useful in any future indexing projects in this subject area. Getting my first paid assignment will be the next hurdle.

Lessons I have learnt

- For those already working in publishing the Paul Hamlyn Foundation will give a grant for the full cost of the course – but you have to have the application approved before starting.
- I probably tried to rush through the early units too quickly. I wish now that I had spent more time researching the various indexing packages and downloading the demo versions to use as I worked through the early units.
- As well as SIdeline I found the following discussion groups helpful:
  - The IndexStudents website (www.indexstudents.com) is particularly active, with supportive responses from more experienced indexers. It also contains practical exercises.
  - The INDEX-L forum (http://indexpup.com/index-list/index.html) generates a lot of messages on a daily basis. If you don't want to cope with so many emails the archives make interesting and useful reading. (I had a problem joining this list – the confirmatory email kept being bounced back – but after contacting the list owner the problem seemed to resolve itself.)

Cost of Accreditation

Just out of interest I have added up the total amount that I have spent in the process of becoming Accredited:

Membership fees (3 years 2003–05)	£180.00
Course Units A–D	£190.00
Test fees for Units A–D and PIA	£225.00
Workshops*	£315.00
Annual conference, Chester 2004	£210.00

Personal reference library:

British Standards (BS 1749:1985 and BS ISO 999:1996)	£80.25
Booth (2001)	£62.50
SI Occasional Papers (3)	£35.00
Knight (1979)	£20.00

MACREX: indexing software and introductory workshop	£339.50
TOTAL	£1,657.25

* ('Biography and names', 'Editing the index' and 'Embedded indexing')

This does not include travelling expenses, or the costs relating to telephones, computers, Internet access and so on. Although this is obviously more than the minimum necessary to pass the training course, I found attending the workshops, the annual conference and the local group meetings provided masses of helpful feedback and gave me the enthusiasm and encouragement to press on. I hope in the end it will prove to be money well spent. As a complete newcomer to the world of indexing I feel more confident about looking for work with a few practical workshops and meetings behind me.

References

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