Readers' Advisory

The Who, the How, and the Why

Duncan Smith

Duncan Smith *is the cofounder of NoveList and is a vice president of EBSCO. He is a past recipient of the Margaret Monroe Award. This is his third appearance in this column.*

*Correspondence to this column should be addressed to **Laurel Tarulli**, Dalhousie University, School of Information Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia; email: laureltarulli@yahoo.com.*

In this issue, we are fortunate to welcome a pioneer in readers' advisory. Duncan Smith has helped shape how we think of readers' services and how we help our readers find their next good book. But, more than that, he has a passion for RA that shines through his presentations, work, and writing. With other pioneers such as Joyce Saricks, Nancy Pearl, and Nancy Brown, we have shaped our RA practices around appeals, the reference interview model and implicit knowledge. In Bill Crowley's 2014 article "Time to Rethink Readers' Advisory Education?," Crowley questions our current practices and provides thoughtful reflection on a new direction for growing RA. This article, written by Duncan Smith, is a response to Crowley's thoughts. Addressing some of Crowley's ideas directly, but also reflecting on what it is to be a professional, Smith presents ideas that should start a dialogue within our profession about how we view RA services, who can be a readers' advisor, and how we push our services into the future.—*Editor*

Bill Crowley's provocative article "Time to Rethink Readers' Advisory Education?"[1] raises several fundamental questions about the service that many of us believe is the cornerstone of the public library's future. These questions focus on the who, the how, and the why of readers' advisory. His article requires us to ponder *who* can best meet the needs of the readers who view the public library as an essential part of their reading ecology. Crowley also challenges us to broaden our view of *how* we serve these readers. Finally, he argues that we position the *why* of these services as literacy and life-long learning services instead of focusing on helping readers find the books they want to read. Crowley's article focuses our thinking on the right questions, but his answers miss the mark when it comes to providing the service readers want and also positioning the library as an essential resource in its community.

THE WHO

The opening paragraphs of "Time to Rethink Readers' Advisory Education?" tell a story about a newly minted professional librarian who was given the opportunity to start a formal RA service in her public library. Rather than hiring additional staff with an MLS from an ALA-accredited institution, this librarian chose to extend the number of staff involved in delivering the service (and increasing the hours the service was provided) by hiring library assistants. Crowley

laments this decision as a missed opportunity to "professionalize" readers' advisory service at this library.

A profession is an occupation or vocation requiring training in the liberal arts or the sciences and advanced study in a specialized field.[2] A professional is someone having great skill or experience in a particular field or activity.[3] The article appearing in *Public Libraries* seems to assert that the MLS prepares individuals to deliver quality service to readers who are looking for their next book. This does not appear to be the case, at least according to the results of a national survey.

In an article summarizing the results of this study of RA service in public libraries, Schwartz reported that 42 percent of respondents received no instruction in RA service as part of their library school coursework. For an additional 40 percent, these services were covered as part of a course on a broader topic. The study goes on to point out that 62 percent of respondents indicated that their in-library training related to serving readers was self-directed and that 23 percent receive no training or support for the provision of RA service from their institutions. Doubtless a library school education prepares one to deliver a wide range of information services on a variety of topics in many contexts, the results of this survey, however, point out the disconnect between the content of many MLS-level education programs and provision of effective reader services. We cannot assume that staffing with MLS-level librarians will result in the delivery of a professional level service. Nor can we assume that individuals will receive training in how to do readers' advisory service from the libraries in which they work.[4]

Another finding of the survey that was not reported in the Schwartz article appearing in *Library Journal* further complicates this issue. In 70 percent of the libraries surveyed, RA was the responsibility of all staff. Only 9 percent of libraries had the full-time readers' advisory staff envisioned by Crowley in his article.[5]

But these findings only beg the question about the professionalization of RA service. Readers' advisory service will only be professionalized when it is consistently and effectively delivered. We should not be so concerned with who delivers the service but the quality of the service that is being delivered. If we want these services and the institutions that provide them to be valued and funded, we need to focus more on how and less on who. Your graduate-level education only prepares you to become a professional. The service you deliver makes you one. So what level of service can a reader who comes into a public library looking for a good book to read expect to receive?

THE HOW

In "The State of RA," Schwartz states,

> Though the majority of respondents feel their libraries are providing RA services either very effectively (10%) or effectively (44%), there is little data available to quantify

that impression. Some 41% of respondents don't track any measures that bear on RA service. And while 38% track usage of RA e-resources and nearly a quarter track the number of RA questions received, measures that indicate customer satisfaction (such as the amount of return business or the quality of the recommendations) are tracked by less than 10% of respondents.

The data that does exist, however, provides a very different view of the assistance that readers receive when they visit their library.[6]

In 1992, Shearer published the results of one of the first unobtrusive studies of readers' advisory effectiveness (think secret shopper).[7] Shearer, who was teaching at North Carolina Central University's School of Information and Library Sciences, sent his students into North Carolina public libraries with instructions to ask a librarian for help in finding another book like Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and a range of other titles. In only 25 percent of the cases did a librarian seek to determine why the student liked the book they had enjoyed. Similar results were found by Anne May and her colleagues in a study of Long Island, New York, public libraries in 2000.[8]

Between 2002 and 2010, Catherine Sheldrick Ross and her colleagues at Western Ontario University sent 640 library school students into libraries to ask a readers' advisory question and to report step-by-step on what happened. She found that RA questions often evoked panic, as happened in this account of a staff member's initial response to a request for help in finding "a good book to read": "She seemed caught off guard or surprised by the question. . . . The librarian gave me a blank look and, appearing confused, asked me to repeat myself."[9]

The results of a secret-shopper study from Queens College (Flushing, New York) as part of a course taught by Mary K. Chelton in the spring of 2014 drove her to post the following list of behaviors to increase effectiveness in responding to requests for a good book to read. The basic nature of these rules indicates that our belief that we are providing very effective or effective RA service is aspirational and not the reality experienced by a majority of our readers.

Mary K's Generic Rules of RA

These rules have emerged from successive "secret user" interactions experienced by my students in the Readers Advisory Services for Adults in the Public Library class at Queens College over the years.

- Listen to the user and try to find out what the person likes and/or loathes reading before you do anything else.
- Ignore what *you* like to read unless you're sure it matches what the reader likes.
- If you have not read or have no knowledge of what the person is asking for, try to get them to tell you more rather than confess what you don't know prematurely.

- Find out if the person wants something else by the same author before suggesting it.
- Remember that many authors write different kinds of books, so even another one by the same author may not be a good match.
- Understand that genre readers generally do not read everything in a genre and find out what subcategories they might like first.
- Use the library's catalog only after you have a clear idea of what the person is interested in and be sure to verify any suggestions with the library's collection (that they are owned, on the shelf, etc.)
- Explain what you are doing as you search, especially if you are using an electronic tool, such as NoveList. Tell them how they can use it themselves if they would like to.
- When you direct users to the new book shelf or stacks, walk with them to continue the conversation.
- Suggest more than one title since suggestions are at best imperfect matches. This increases your chances of a good match.
- Unless the user tells you that there is some urgency, ask for some more time and offer to phone or email a result at a later time. This can give you more time to search and query colleagues and may lead to a better match.[10]

We know that there are effective practitioners of the art and science of answering the question, "What's a good book to read?" The challenge for us is that our profession does not have a systematic way of codifying that information and sharing it. This service is not covered in graduate-level coursework, and librarians and library staff are left on their own to figure out how to do this work well; therefore our users are sometimes the beneficiaries of random acts of effectiveness, but more often than not the service they receive is less than adequate. Anne May and her colleagues summed up the outcome of our present RA infrastructure in her 2000 article in *Library Journal*:

> Our study did not reveal any formal institutionalized RA protocol. Rather, our findings underscored that a non-methodical, informal, and serendipitous response was the norm to a patron's request for a "good read." This is an approach that at times serves patrons brilliantly but more often offers unprofessional and unsatisfactory service. We can and must do better.[11]

Doing better means taking all of the trial-and-error (self-directed) learning that is going on in our institutions and identifying what is working and what is not. The lessons-learned by individual practitioners (tacit knowledge) as they deliver RA services is the tacit knowledge that Crowley refers to in his article. He is correct that this knowledge is difficult to codify and distribute but there are methods in place for doing this. For example, Katrina Pugh from Columbia University's Information and Knowledge Management Program documents a process for achieving this in her book *Sharing*

Hidden Know-How.[12] Other professions have developed models for surfacing tacit knowledge and best-practices including the practice audit model,[13] which was used by this author in the development of *Talking with Readers: A Competency Based Approach to Readers' Advisory Service* (EBSCO/NoveList 2000), which was discussed in an article published in this publication.[14]

Crowley argues that our focus on how to effectively do "the work" limits the field and distracts us from questions that are "immensely more important" to directors, funders, and taxpayers. He suggests that we need to broaden our focus from leisure reading to more defendable areas like learning. Until we can consistently deliver effective service, however, I believe that our attention needs to remain on the how of our service and our tacit knowledge. We can certainly benefit from importing insights and research from the fields of education and reading studies but we also have a lot to learn and exploit from our own practice. Rather than seeing our tacit knowledge as a liability, I believe that mining that knowledge is our best chance for moving us off the performance plateau that we find ourselves on today and elevating the quality of service our readers receive.

It was more than twenty-five years ago that Joyce Saricks and her coworker Nancy Brown realized that they had a problem. The books that their readers were interested in and wanted more of had not been studied. The fiction titles that were driving circulation lacked a classification framework that defined and grouped titles based on their similarities. There was no Dewey for fiction. Through trial and error, these two practitioners developed a method for thinking about books in terms that mattered to readers. Appeal became the framework for conversations between library staff and readers that helped get those readers to their next book. The concept continues to be expanded with the development of appeal terms and frameworks for audiobooks and illustrations (picture books and graphic novels).[15]

Neil Hollands faced a different problem at Williamsburg (VA) Regional Library. He felt that only delivering RA in face-to-face interactions was limiting the quality of the service he could provide and the number of users who would take advantage of that service. He developed the concept of form-based RA,[16] a service strategy that is now in use in 19 percent of the public libraries in the United States. This service allows readers to complete a form that outlines their reading interests. The completed form is routed to a staff member who creates a personalized list of suggestions based on the reader's interests. The form is usually accessed from the library's website and the list of suggestions sent to the user via email.[17]

Alison Kastner and a team of librarians from Multnomah County (OR) Library felt that more of their users would take advantage of library staff members' knowledge about books and reading if that expertise was more visible. They also wanted to do a better of job of connecting readers with library personnel whose expertise matched those interests. They hypothesized that readers would be better served when

they interacted with staff who were knowledgeable about the readers' genres and subject interests rather than leaving that connection to chance. Multnomah received funding from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation to explore the use of technology to match readers and library staff. The result was the library's My Librarian Service (https://multcolib.org/my -librarian).

Saricks, Hollands, and the librarians at Multnomah are all exhibiting the behaviors of the consummate professional. They have identified a gap or challenge in providing effective service and using their specialized knowledge and skills have developed strategies, tactics, and approaches to improve the services provided to their readers. All of them are engaged in what Donald Schon calls reflective practice.[18] To move RA service forward, we need to not only pay attention and incorporate the thinking of other professions. We need to identify, quantify, and disseminate our own. Using the tacit knowledge of expert practitioners to move an entire field forward is not something new. In the 1883, the same year that Melvil Dewey started his stint as chief librarian at Columbia University, Mark Twain published *Life on the Mississippi*, which described how he became a river boat pilot on the Mississippi and was taught to "read" the river by an experienced pilot.[19]

FROM HALF-RIGHT REFERENCE TO SUCCESSFUL RA

We already have a model for transferring tacit knowledge from individuals to institutions. The studies conducted by Shearer and May were modeled on unobtrusive studies of reference. These studies and they results are summarized in "Unobtrusive Reference Testing: The 55 Percent Rule," by Hernon and McClure.[20] These studies, which began as early as 1968, consistently found that reference librarians answered reference questions accurately 50–65 percent of the time. The 55-percent rule of reference accuracy was developed as a result of this work.

In 1985, Ralph Gers and Lillie Seward reported on the results of an unobtrusive study of public library reference service in Maryland.[21] The results of this study confirmed the findings of previous studies. The Maryland study, however, did not limit itself to measuring reference accuracy. It also identified behaviors that contributed to reference success. These behaviors became the basis for a checklist that staff could use to improve their reference skills. Maryland did not leave it up to individual library staff members to adopt these behaviors. They developed a three-day training program that was designed to integrate these skills into daily practice. More than two hundred Maryland public library personnel who provided reference service went through this three-day training. In 1986, a research firm was hired to conduct another state-wide unobtrusive study to determine whether this training improved reference accuracy. The major finding of this second study was that reference accuracy had

risen to 77 percent in libraries whose staff had participated in the training. In libraries whose staff had not participated, accuracy was achieved only 60 percent of the time. Seward goes on to point out that one library in the study went from 42.5 percent accuracy in the 1983 study to 97.5 percent accuracy in 1986 and 93.8 percent accuracy in a third study conducted in 1990.[22]

The Baltimore County Public Library is one example of how a library institutionalized these behaviors to ensure that they became a part of standard practice. The library implemented peer coaching so that staff members observed and supported each other in using the behaviors in their transactions. The behaviors were also incorporated into performance reviews and included the observation of staff members responding to reference questions. The standard that was established for these reviews was that staff members must display the three effective behaviors defined in the standard 80 percent of the time. Each staff member was observed twenty-four times during the year, and an examination of 25 percent of the initial reviews found that only 6 percent of the sample "needed improvement" in one of the behaviors.[23]

The Maryland example shows us what it takes to improve our practice. We already have research that shows us how well we are doing. Now we need research that identifies and defines the behaviors needed to effectively respond to readers' advisory questions. Library staffs need to be educated about these behaviors and provided with opportunities to learn them and put them into practice. They then need to receive constant support and reinforcement in the use of these behaviors. We not only need to rethink how we educate individuals to become readers' advisors. We need to create a systematic approach that acknowledges that learning for our profession does not end when we cross the stage to receive our MLS. It is a life-long commitment to constantly and honestly assess how well we are doing in delivering service to our readers, develop strategies and approaches for improving that service and implementing them.

The case study mentioned above also proves that achieving the goal of improving RA will require significant investments of time, energy, resources, and will. Is this investment worth it? The answer is all about why.

THE WHY

Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) opens with one of the main characters, Mr. Gradgrind, saying "facts, facts, fill up their heads with facts." His approach to education as well as everything else is contrasted with that of Sissy, the child of a circus owner. A major theme of the novel is fact versus fancy or utilitarianism versus imagination.

This debate is not limited to Dickens' novel or to the nineteenth century; it is very much alive in the twenty-first century as evidenced by Crowley's urging that we expand the scope of RA to embrace reading's contribution to literacy

and learning. He argues that services that are solely based on leisure reading will not receive funding in the current political and economic climate and also feels this places both the public library and the profession at risk. He marvels at readers' advisors resistance to the educational value of reading. I suspect that our reluctance to embrace an educational mission for RA is based in part on the fact that learning and a traditional view of information services was used to devalue fiction, its readers, leisure, and staff who believed in providing service to readers who sought anything that didn't have a Dewey number. Esther Carrier in *Fiction in Public Libraries 1876-1900* chronicles the foundation our profession's long anti-fiction tradition.[24] Reading her book, one is left with the impression that the only use our founders had for fiction was its use as bait to lure people into the Cathedral of Learning that was the public library.

Research has shown that reading—any reading—has positive effects on the reader. Research has also shown that reading fiction specifically has benefits too. Keith Oatley, a researcher at the University of Toronto, cites several articles that show that reading fiction increases empathy (our ability to understand someone other than ourselves). Studies also show that reading produces subtle changes in our personalities: it has the ability to "loosen us up," opening us to new experiences, new feelings, and new ways of thinking, maybe even new business ideas. Oatley points out that in many ways fiction functions like a flight simulator, allowing us to "test drive" the experiences of others.[25] Readers told Ross that books they read for pleasure had awakened them to new perspectives; provided role models that supported or validated their identity; gave reassurance, comfort, and confirmed the reader's self-worth; provided a connection to others and conveyed an awareness of not being alone; gave them courage to make a change; and increased their acceptance of themselves and others.[26]

While I agree with Crowley that we need to stress all of the values of reading to the public library's stakeholders, we need to ensure that we do not make the mistakes of the past and privilege learning to the exclusion of leisure reading and its importance to our users and its positive benefits to our communities.

Perhaps an anecdote will better illustrate my concerns about the "why" of readers' advisory. A few years ago, I attended a meeting where a nationally known political strategist and commentator addressed an audience of public library administrators. The topic of the conference was leadership. The featured speaker talked about growing up in a hard-working, blue-collar family. She also talked about how her public library and the books she borrowed from it as a child and as a teenager had not only opened her eyes to a wider world but gave her the courage and strength to grow beyond the circumstances into which she was born. Later in the conference a group of library leaders participated in a panel that focused on how they became leaders. A board of trustee member asked each of them to name a book that had helped them become a leader. Each member of the panel

responded with some version of "I don't believe that you can become a leader by reading a book."

Here was a case where some our profession's most respected leaders made statements that diminished the value of their core product: books. Around the same time, leaders from other professions were extolling the virtues of reading and its effect on making them leaders. John Coleman's article for *Harvard Business Review*, "For Those Who Want to Lead Read," is just one example.[27] Equally compelling is the book that Mia Bauer credits with empowering her to abandon a successful but stifling career in law to start a bakery devoted to cupcakes. The book that resulted in the creation of Crumbs, a business with a goal of having two hundred locations, was not a how-to-start-your business book. It was Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*.[28]

Rather than rethinking RA education, I believe that we need to rethink our profession's attitude toward reading. Rather than running away from reading, we need to embrace what those individuals who use us already know. They know that reading—including leisure reading—is an important and essential part of their personal and their community's inspiration infrastructure. For a majority of our regular and long-term users, it is the primary reason they use and value their library.

Furthermore, we need to not only embrace reading, we need to commit to doing the work that will result in our readers receiving quality service. We need to work to intentionally and consistently deliver services that result in readers not only finding more books they want to read, but help them understand what draws them to those books, increase their strategies for finding them, assist them in realizing the connection between their reading and their lives and finally provide them with opportunities to share their insights and pleasures with others.

Given all of the challenges and opportunities in front of us, will our profession realize its potential to support readers in their personal journey? As Wallace Stevens says in "Asides on the Oboe,"

> The prologues are over. It is a question now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.[29]

References

1. Bill Crowley, "Time to Rethink Readers' Advisory Education?" *Public Libraries* 53, no 4 (July/August 2014): 37–43.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: American Heritage and Houghton-Mifflin, 1969): 1044–45.
3. Ibid., 1045.
4. Meredith Schwartz and Henrietta Thornton-Verma, "The State of Readers' Advisory," *Library Journal* 139, no 2 (February 1, 2014): 30–31.
5. "Readers' Advisory Survey—Final Report," *Library Journal* (2013): 5.
6. Schwartz and Thornton-Verma, "The State of Readers' Advisory," 31.
7. Kenneth D. Shearer, "The Nature of the Readers' Advisory

Transaction in Adult Reading," in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*, edited by Kenneth D. Shearer, 1–20 (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1996).

8. Anne K. May et al., "A Look at Readers' Advisory Services," *Library Journal* 125 (September 15, 2000): 40–43.

9. Catherine Sheldrick Ross to Duncan Smith, personal communication, May 23, 2014.

10. Mary K. Chelton, "Mary K.'s Generic Rules for RA," personal communication to Duncan Smith, April 22, 2014.

11. May et al., "A Look at Readers' Advisory Services," 43.

12. Katrina Pugh, *Sharing Hidden Know-How* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2011).

13. Donna S. Queeney, "Problems of Content and Delivery in Continuing Professional Education," in *Professional Workers As Learners*, edited by E. Stephen Hunt, 35–55 (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Sept. 1992).

14. Duncan Smith, "Talking with Readers: A Competency Based Approach to Readers' Advisory Service," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (Winter 2000): 135–43.

15. *The Secret Language of Books: A Guide to Appeal* (Durham, NC: NoveList, EBSCO, 2014).

16. Neil Hollands and Barry Trott, "Improving the Model for Interactive Readers' Advisory Service," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (Spring 2006): 205–12.

17. "Readers' Advisory Survey—Final Report," 2.

18. Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

19. Duncan Smith, "The Greening of Librarianship: Towards a Human Resource Development Ecology," *Journal of Library Administration* 17, no. 1 (1992): 37–54.

20. Peter Hernon and Charles R. McClure, "Unobtrusive Reference Testing: The 55 Percent Rule," *Library Journal* 111 (April 15, 1986): 37–41.

21. Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward, "Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study," *Library Journal* (November 1, 1985): 32–35.

22. Lillie Seward Dyson, "Improving Reference Services: A Maryland Training Program Bring Positive Results," *Public Libraries* 31 (September/October 1992): 284–89.

23. Laura J. Isenstein, "Get Your Reference Staff on the STAR Track," *Library Journal* (April 15, 1992): 34–38.

24. Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries: 1876–1900* (New York: Scarecrow, 1965).

25. Keith Oatley, "The Mind's Flight Simulator," *The Psychologist* 21, no. 12 (December 2008): 1030–32.

26. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Finding without Seeking: What Readers Say about the Role of Pleasure Reading as a Source of Information," *APLIS* (June 2000): 72–81.

27. John Coleman "For Those Who Want to Lead, Read," *Harvard Business Review* (online), August 15, 2012, https://hbr.org/2012/08/for-those-who-want-to-lead-rea.

28. Duncan Smith "Books: An Essential Part of Essential Libraries," *Public Library Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2011): 257–69.

29. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 250.