



A peer-reviewed student publication
of the University at Buffalo
Department of Library and Information Studies

Reader Development as a Core Library Function

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Library Student Journal,
May 2007 Abstract

Abstract

Reader Development is an approach to attracting and supporting library users practiced mainly in England. Rather than continuing the debate over the recreational approach to user services versus the educational approach, the Reader Development approach combines the two in an effort to make the act of reading more enjoyable, and thus attract new users to libraries.

Editorial

How should the library function in this day and age? It is certainly not a new question, and in fact it has been posed for centuries. The library is in a constant state of change and adaptation—the result of a continued desire to serve the library patron who is also in a constant state of change. Each iteration of the question posits a host of new answers.

In 1981, Nora Rawlinson suggested that serving the library patron meant “being alert to the books mentioned on yesterday’s

‘Donahue Show,’ buying many copies of best sellers, and forecasting trends in readers’ interests and information requirements. In other words, ‘Give ‘em what they want’” (p. 2188). This approach was immediately rebutted by Murray C. Bob (1982), who vehemently believed that “libraries have a responsibility to ideas, to nurturing, sustaining, preserving, and making readily available the intellectual capital of our society to anyone who may want or need it, now or in the future” (p. 1719). More recently, some information professionals have argued that public libraries should function as information technology portals, making *access* a core function. With so many opposing viewpoints, the debate on how libraries should be developed to best suit the library patron has raged on in North America.

At the same time, an ocean away, the United Kingdom has quietly focused on a different issue, one which strikes closer to the heart of library function: How can the act of reading be made more enjoyable? It stands to reason that a population encouraged to *enjoy* reading will embrace the libraries that serve them, regardless of whether those libraries agree with Rawlinson, Bob, or anyone else. This reader development theory is far more important than any other theory of how libraries should function because it recognizes and emphasizes the central importance of the act of reading—without

which libraries would cease to function at all.

Opening the Book (<http://www.openingthebook.com/>) and *The Reading Agency* (<http://www.readingagency.org.uk/>) promote reader development in Britain. According to *Opening the Book* (n.d), which has been involved with reader development since its infancy in the late-1980s, reader development is a means of increasing people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, opening up reading choices, offering opportunities for people to share their reading experience, and raising the status of reading as a creative activity. *The Reading Agency* (2005), a similar initiative started in England in 2002, has a mandate to: reach more people with reading; develop an ambitious vision and national policy for libraries' work with readers; help libraries and their partners develop and sustain vibrant reading services; and research, promote, and publicise the power of libraries' contribution to reading and writing (Who We Are, ¶5). What is particularly refreshing about the goals of both *Opening the Book* and *The Reading Agency* is the emphasis on the reader and the de-emphasis on the medium. In this way reader development can be contextualized within the reader-response school of critical thought. Holding that the reader is a producer rather than a consumer of meanings, reader-response similarly emphasizes the importance of the reader in consuming and de-emphasizes what is consumed.

While in the past, literature promotion has meant managing the product (i.e. the book), *Opening the Book* (n.d.) suggests reader-centred literature promotion "starting with the reader and the experience of reading" (What does reader-centred mean?, ¶2). To achieve the goals of reader development in a reader-centred way, a vast array of strategies and approaches are used. The *educational* approach (championed by Bob) is blended with the *recreational* approach

(posited by Rawlinson) and then supplemented with an appropriate amount of information technology in an effort to appeal to the widest range of patrons possible. *The People's Network* (<http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/>), an online reading and reference portal coordinated by England's public libraries, is an excellent example of propagating reader development through the use of technology. With the goal of making reading an enjoyable and judgement-free experience, *The People's Network* allows readers to enquire, discover, and read online.

Library layout, displays, reading groups, reading resources (such as booklists and reader's advisory), and technology are all strategies that can help serve a wide range of readers in their reading experiences. This does not necessitate that a library become a Chapters or a Borders, but rather that it blends what is reader-friendly about a chain bookstore experience with what is reader-friendly about a library experience. Similarly, reader-centred collection development involves choosing a wide range of books for a wide ranging audience. This approach does not take a position on the prickly issue of quality, but defines a strong collection as one which represents a range of books in relation to a range of audiences (*Opening the Book*, n.d). Such collection development adheres to the two, often neglected, rules of library science articulated by S. R. Ranganathan: that every reader has his or her book, and every book has its reader.

If every library focused on the breadth of the collection rather than the quality of individual items (in terms of popularity or literary merit) they would be serving their patrons well. Similarly, if every library fostered reader development, they would have more patrons to serve.

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