CM Shadowing Journal
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LIS 615: Collection Management

No Shadow of Doubt: A Collection Management Shadowing Journal

Introduction

Given the task of shadowing a collection management professional, I leapt at the excuse to take a professional day of absence from my own workplace – Hawaii Baptist Academy (HBA) elementary school library – and visit the librarian at the high school, Arlene Huster. Arlene and I met each other at the beginning of the school year, but aside from the occasional phone conversation since then, have never had a real chance to "talk shop."

I hoped Arlene could give me insight into managing the collections of private institutions, especially those serving religious establishments. Class discussions, the Van Orden and Bishop text, and outside readings have been providing insight into collection management in general, but rarely do they address the unique position of librarians at Christian schools. Arlene invited me up to the high school with enthusiasm.

Arlene received both her BA in Elementary Education and her MA in Library Science from the University of Hawaii. After graduation, she worked as a substitute librarian in Hawaii's Department of Education, but did not much care for the work. Fortunately, after a move to Utah, she secured a position as a full-time librarian at Whittier Elementary School, a Title I school she stayed at for fourteen years and ended up loving. This is her first year as librarian at HBA.

I visited the HBA high school library for over four hours on February 17, 2006. Most of the time was spent conversing with Arlene, but I was also able to peruse the physical collection and layout of the library, speak to Lynne Hayashi, the library assistant, and take a look at the circulation computer. This account details my observations about the following aspects of

managing a private school library collection.

- Presentation
- Written Policy
- Selection
- Acquisition
- Deselection
- Time Management

Presentation

The HBA high school library is small but inviting. Arlene and the previous librarian have managed to arrange shelving units and create displays which use the tight space effectively. Two sections are especially welcoming: new books greet visitors at the entrance door, and the fiction section features soft lighting and cozy wing-backed chairs. The thought Arlene evidently puts into presenting the high school collection made me feel strangely guilty; because younger patrons are enthusiastic about both visiting the library and using library resources, I don't have to work quite as hard as she does into coaxing patrons to visit or to borrow. The high school library's section signs also impressed me, and less than a month after my visit, I placed an order for similar signage.

Arlene believes that while presenting the collection in a visually appealing way is important, librarians sometimes need to go beyond that to make patrons aware of materials. Van Orden and Bishop also advocate "acquaint[ing] teachers with the collection" (126). To that end, Arlene has sent a couple of newsletters to the faculty announcing new resources. I found inspiration in this idea as well. Although I did not have time to compose a whole newsletter, I did compile a flyer publicizing new non-fiction books; I included brief summaries and organized the list more or less by subject area. While none of the teachers beat down the library doors as a result, the principal did ask to borrow two of the books, and liked them.

Written Policy

As I suspected due to the lack of a written policy at the elementary school, the high school library has no written collection management policy, either. While Arlene laments this fact, she realizes that writing an entire policy plus getting it approved by the Board of Directors will be years in the process. She has already begun gathering a Library Committee together, for, as she says, "I don't want to make such important decisions all by myself!" Van Orden and Bishop would approve; their policy-writing process (81) includes several steps involving a committee. I admire her spirit of openness, especially since I tend to try to accomplish as much as possible independently, involving others grudgingly if at all.

Selection

Arlene uses separate selection methods for non-fiction and fiction materials. She agrees that she has "a responsibility to ensure that the collection meets the school's curricular and instructional needs" (Van Orden 203), and selects non-fiction sources accordingly, mostly through observation of students, teachers, and classes. When a teacher brings a class into the library, or when students come in for individual research, Arlene makes a note of the shelves and resources the students use; she also consults that teacher regarding her resource needs. Those sections of the library used by classes and by individuals for class projects receive most of Arlene's attention as far as updating is concerned. She believes that subjects researched one year will likely be targeted again in subsequent years, and is anxious that researchers not come up empty-handed.

Denise Harbour, proponent of collection mapping, agrees that a school library's collection should be "tailored to the specific needs of a school" (5). In a *Book Report* article she

shows how mapping a collection can help a media specialist perform collection management tasks – especially selection and deselection – more effectively. For school media centers, Harbour suggests that after gathering collection data (number of resources, age of resources, etc.), media specialists use the data to map *sections* of the collection rather than the collection as a whole. These sections should correspond to curricular units; the media specialist can then manage the collection in chunks according to the school's needs.

Harbour's advice is especially helpful for new school media specialists – like me – or for those tackling large collections for the first time. As an experienced librarian, however, Arlene seems to already be successfully accomplishing at least one of the collection mapping goals: making informed management decisions. Although Arlene has not mapped the HBA high school library's collection on paper, she mentally maps sections of the collection as she conducts interviews and observations of researchers. She has also begun exploring Follett's mapping capabilities and is excited about the possibilities; she realizes that a tangible representation of the collection can be shared with administrators and other interested parties.

Another way Arlene ensures that patrons' needs inform selection decisions is by making a "Library Resources Request Form" available to teachers, students, and other library users. The form differs greatly from the "Materials Evaluation Form" pictured in Van Orden and Bishop's text (127), which solicits detailed input on a specific item. Arlene's form is simple and short, asking for a specific title (if known), subject, and type of media desired. She does select items to fill most, but not all, submitted requests. A request for a certain video game, for example, was not filled because Arlene decided that including that game in the high school's collection did nothing to advance the school's mission of academic excellence within a Christian environment.

For new fiction, Arlene relies heavily on trusted sources for reviews. Some of her

sources include Peggy Sharp lists, Wilson recommendations, and *School Library Journal* reviews. Next in line on her list of favorite sources are *Booklist* and *Library Media Connection,* two sources that I favor as well. Arlene also goes through "best book" lists to find book titles, then finds reviews for those titles in trusted sources. Lately she has been using the Follett "Titlewave" website to assist in locating reviews from certain sources she trusts and chooses.

Acquisition

Arlene depends on two jobbers, Baker & Taylor and Follett Library Resources, for most of her titles. While Baker & Taylor is generally less expensive, Arlene likes Follett's online system of marking titles already in HBA's collection, especially since earlier in the year she mistakenly ordered titles already on the shelves. Local bookstores and publishers serve as Arlene's source for Hawaii literature, and a company called Christian Book Distributors provides Christian materials. Amazon, while not a first choice, can be counted on to supply hard-to-find titles. For periodicals, Arlene allows EBSCO subscription service to handle most of the school's magazines. However, since HBA also subscribes to EBSCO's online magazine database, she is considering dropping a few hard copy subscriptions of magazines that are used for research rather than read on a regular basis.

Deselection

On a web page entitled *Weeding the Collection,* Dr. William C. Robinson, professor of information science at the University of Tennessee, notes that circulation is the factor most used by librarians to inform deselection ("Weeding Items Not Used"), and that looking at the length of time a resource remains shelved between uses helps librarians see which items are integral to the collection ("Criteria"). Robinson's web page has proven extremely useful to me in my second

year as an elementary librarian; I have consulted the page several times in attempting to set guidelines for my own deselection process.

After interviewing Arlene Huster, however, I would hasten to add a warning to Robinson's web page: "School media specialists, beware! Automated records are not always accurate indicators of usage data!" Earlier this year, Arlene noticed that certain books had not been used for years, according to the circulation software. She re-evaluated them and discarded a few. Later in the semester, a history teacher brought her classes to the library for in-library research and could not find some of the books she relied on every year for that month's unit. What I can learn from this story is that I must rely on various sources – teachers, students, my own observations – for data; I cannot depend only on records kept by the circulation computer. I can also let patrons know that although I appreciate their helpful intentions, they should *not* reshelve resources they use in the library, in order that those resources can be logged by the circulation computer as having been used.

My biggest philosophical challenge as an HBA librarian thus far has been choosing and retaining resources appropriate for a Christian school while upholding the ideal of intellectual freedom. I tend to agree with Kerry Leigh Ellison, whose article "Satan in the Library: Are Children in Danger?" first appeared in *School Library Journal* in 1994 and has been widely referenced on the Internet since then. In the article, Ellison details her own childhood reading journey and cites the diverse ideas she gleaned from books while growing up. Ellison grew up in an abusive family; access to all kinds of books, she claims, both those containing Christian ideas *and* those written from non-Christian points of view, was a vital part of her healing and learning process and of her eventual growth toward and acceptance of Christianity. Censorship, Ellison admits, is inherent in any children's section, but should be practiced with regard to

developmental appropriateness (¶16) rather than with the intention of limiting access to information (¶17). I agree. Religious parents afraid of allowing youngsters to come in contact with ideas which contradict their own values would do well to consider that "exposing [ideas] to the light of day" (¶ 21) actually lessens the lure of immoral or amoral beliefs and practices. I would add that children whose parents who actually converse with them about diverse beliefs are more likely to be discerning in their own, than are children whose parents shelter them or ignore the issue altogether.

I was hoping to gain some insight in this area from Arlene, so I asked her how she deals with resource challenges. Having expected my query to launch a long and difficult discussion, I was somewhat disappointed with her quick, brief answer: Always keep the mission of the school in mind. The library's job is to uphold the mission of the school.

For a month now, I have been mulling over this answer, and I am beginning to see that there is more to it than meets the ear. A library does not exist to serve itself; no institution does. In HBA's case, its libraries do not even exist to serve the public. They exist solely to support the betterment of students in the areas of academic excellence and Christian enlightenment. Perhaps I have been thinking too much about the issue, and considering too many angles. The old adage, "Keep it simple," comes to mind. If I focus on the school's two main objectives, perhaps my anxiety about intellectual freedom versus Christian guidance will lessen. Focusing on academic excellence means that I must maintain resources which broaden the intellectual experiences of students; focusing on Christian enlightenment means that I must maintain resources which express Biblical and the teachings of Jesus. Items which accomplish either of these two things must be selected and must be retained.

Time Management

During a typical week, Arlene spends approximately one-third of her time selecting, acquiring, and deselecting materials. At Whittier Elementary school in Utah, because classes came to the library regularly and often, she was only able to spend one-tenth of her time in such activities. Arlene laughed as she confided that when she first applied to HBA, she was actually eyeing the elementary position, and was disappointed that a librarian was already in place there. She began the year at the high school willingly but warily. By the time I met with her during the second semester, however, she was so pleased with the amount of non-teaching time afforded her at the high school that if she were given the option, she would definitely choose her position over mine!

Conclusion

My visit to Arlene and the HBA high school library gave me some valuable insights; two in particular stand out. First, when in doubt, I need to think of my objectives in simple terms: The library serves the school; I serve the library. This is not to say that I must agree or immediately comply with every parent complaint, faculty request, or administrative plan. As a professional, I have the responsibility – and hopefully, expertise – to weigh others' *desires* with my assessment of patron *needs.* However, I do not need to pressure myself to be the judge of What Is Right for all time and all people, only the objective evaluator of what is best for my school now and in the future.

Second, the benefits of regular collaboration with colleagues are worthwhile. Within a month of my visit to Arlene and the high school library, I have tried or implemented at least five ideas I gleaned from my conversations and observations there:

- *Video Deselection:* When re-evaluating videos, I placed a box of rarely- or never-borrowed videos in the workroom and solicited teacher input.
- *Signage:* I ordered new signs after observing the clarity of the high school signage.
- *Magazines:* After perusing the high school's periodical section, I subscribed to two new magazines.
- *Fliers:* To make teachers aware of new non-fiction books, I printed fliers listing titles and giving short summaries.
- *Circulation Software:* From Lynne, the library assistant, I learned how to categorize items, so I created a category for donated books at the elementary library.

Additionally, I have noticed that since February 17 the lines of communication between HBA's two libraries have been much more open than they were before Arlene and I had our meeting. Perhaps the ice was broken, perhaps she and I feel freer to "bother" each other with questions or comments, or perhaps we just enjoyed the professional interchange so much that we are reluctant to let it go. In any case, for about a month, Arlene and I have been emailing each other once or twice a week to discuss library matters both big (*e.g.* a joint online encyclopedia subscription) and small (*e.g.* incentives for National Library Week). We have even discussed the possibility of having a quarterly meeting, which we would take turns hosting.

After this experience, there is no shadow of doubt in my mind that I would highly recommend job shadowing to new media specialists, librarians-in-training, and even experienced professionals. Conferring with someone whose position or area of specialization closely matches one's own seems most effective. Setting up a meeting and taking the time to get together does take some sacrifice, but the resulting exchange of ideas plus the opportunity to connect with a colleague in the work environment will likely be well worth every librarian's time and effort.

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