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Kelly Fojtik

kfojtik@my.dom.edu

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Book Clubs and Displays: RA for Readers and Communities

Kelly Fojtik

Library and Information Studies, Dominican University

Abstract

Readers' advisory (RA) can be informally defined as match making between readers and books, with a librarian functioning as matchmaker. Published literature agrees that RA is an important professional practice when carried out by librarians; and that RA is important for increasing literacy, benefitting individual readers and also their communities. The literature describes new types of book clubs and displays that provide RA services for patrons in attractive, less direct ways than the standard RA interview. This paper reports on and examines the benefits of two library initiatives, book clubs and displays, that function as less direct forms of RA. How do library book clubs act as RA agents? What kinds of book clubs provide effective RA and for whom? What value do RA and book clubs bring to a community? Displays in the library have a role to play in RA by suggesting books to patrons and providing a more discreet level of interaction. How can library displays provide RA? How can patron interaction with library displays be encouraged? Librarian led book clubs and displays are a vital part of full spectrum readers' advisory. Less direct RA is needed to reach more readers benefitting them and their community.

Keywords: readers' advisory, RA, library book clubs, book displays, library outreach

Librarians are on the forefront of promoting reading and literacy in their communities. Librarians purchase books and plan the use of library resources and spaces; and they provide readers' advisory (RA) in many different ways to connect people with books. What is readers' advisory? "Readers' advisory is the act of recommending books to patrons," according to a video by the North Dakota State Library (2017). What is important about readers' advisory? RA connects readers to what they recognize as a good book therefore encouraging reading and increasing literacy in the community. RA has great importance in libraries and in the lives of readers as a means of connecting readers to the materials they want. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) Librarians who work at a public facing desk, select books, make book displays, create social media posts, and host book clubs make positive impacts on individual readers and enhance literacy throughout their community.

RA and Readers

RA librarians seek to pair readers with books through means both direct and less direct. Direct types of RA include the RA interview, form-based RA, and certain types of social media interactions. RA librarians also promote books and reading through displays, social media, collection management techniques, and RA programs (book clubs/author visits). There is much research that agrees on the benefits of leisure reading, "pleasure reading itself has proven social benefits, including increased empathy, better insight into the surrounding world, healthy escape from stress, and an improved sense of connectedness with the wider community. (Panorama Project, 2023) What are RA librarians doing to support the important community goal of promoting reading in order to reap individual and community benefits? Librarians are doing quite a lot. This paper will examine librarian-led RA practices and programs that encourage reading and increased literacy to the benefit of individual readers and their community.

RA and Book Clubs

The library book club is both one of the most traditional and one of the most changing RA programs. Library hosted book clubs provide a form of passive RA. Book recommendations take the form of book club picks and book clubs often provide next reads or read-alikes as part of the program. Book club reading is likely to increase the amount of reading by individuals and so benefits the wider community: “Participation in shared reading groups is linked to enhanced relaxation, calmness, concentration, quality of life, confidence and self-esteem, as well as feelings of shared community and common purpose.” (Reading Agency, 2023) A range of book clubs for adults can increase literacy in the library and extend literacy gains and benefits to the community.

Traditional library-based book clubs are powerful RA agents. Librarians plan book selections that they deem to be of wide relevance to a given group of readers and that have the cachet of currency and high interest. Librarians planning selections act as “discovery agent(s),” professionals who know the bulk of the collection and use this knowledge to match books to people. (Wyatt, 2021.) Book club readers will be introduced to new titles, learn about the background of authors, and enjoy a focused, librarian-led discussion. Book clubs benefit individuals as they grow personal literacy and make personal connections through the discussions or after its sessions. Book club participation brings cognitive, emotional, and community benefits. Participation in book clubs also benefits the community by providing forums where civil discourse is modeled. Book clubs most of all encourage reading. Life-long readers are shown to be happier, healthier, and more engaged community members. (Kochar, 2017)

In contrast to traditional library-bound book clubs are new styles of book clubs aimed at younger adults which may meet at a brewery or coffee shop. These book clubs are key RA services for a key demographic. Younger readers may also take part in Zoom or other online book discussions, existing formats that grew during the height of COVID. One example of an off-site book club is Books & Brews

hosted by Ela Area Library. Many of the benefits of these newer book clubs remain the same. There are also added benefits to the community: library-community partnership and filling spaces with purposeful reading gatherings that are inclusive and open to all. Book club meetings are an excellent RA opportunity to share resources with young adults who may not otherwise connect with the library. Librarians may choose to share a small selection of read-a-likes with book club attendees as a conclusion to the meeting. Most readers seem to appreciate an impromptu RA infomercial that brings help for what to read next.

Another trend in the cool and new department for book clubs is the Silent Book Club, as discussed in an article in the Wall Street Journal (McKay, 2023). The meetings of this book club are simply a set time and a set place with one stated purpose: reading. It's a low-key place for a type of readers, who may be introverts, who do not wish to engage in discussions. The Silent Book Club is also a place for people who do not like to be told what to read; yet there *can be* indirect, subtle forms of RA even for silent book club members. A display, strategically placed nearby, called "What to Read Next" (with browsable books, free bookmarks, and book lists) is a nice addition to enhance the atmosphere of the silent meetings with the discreet purpose of passive RA. Book clubs of all stripes offer indirect, yet strong RA from the library to readers. New alternative book clubs (community outreach and in-reach) may welcome a "large population of non-readers who could become readers if libraries managed to reach out to them" (Dali, 2015) and be a strong RA force for promoting reading in the community.

An example of a library book club that brings greater quality of life for older adults is Ela Area Library's Senior Book Discussion which meets quarterly as a hybrid in-person/Zoom meeting. Liz Kristan, head of the library's Outreach Department, says that Senior Book Discussion and outreach book deliveries to assisted living communities are really about connection. (Liz Kristan, personal communication, November 30, 2023) Kristan states that the overarching need of many seniors is human touch. Kristan and her team of two outreach assistants often conduct book club while holding the hand of a lonely person who has

reached out and held on. (Liz Kristan, personal communication, November 30, 2023) The work of the outreach team illustrates the essence of effective RA; it is foremost patron centered. The power of sharing books with people is realized as the outreach team engages in book club discussions and in “taking books outside library walls” (Panorama Project, 2023) into the community. Active library outreach that brings books and book discussions to people limited in their ability to come to the library is a powerful type of patron-centered RA that benefits lonely, isolated people and strengthens the community. RA as practiced by the outreach staff is an anchor for the library’s place in the community.

RA Displays

Library displays are “bedrock mainstays” of the public library and can be the “magic bullet” of RA. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) Displays play an often unpromoted, though large role in providing RA according to professional librarian reader advisors. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) Patrons who may avoid engaging directly with a librarian for an RA encounter *will* encounter RA displays in the library. Librarians can learn a lot from retail by planning ways to upsell books to patrons from an assortment of displays in many locations. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) “Displays, staff picks, shelf-talkers, even face-outs can serve as recommendations,” according to RA librarian Lynn Lobash. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) Librarians need look no further than the closest book store or favorite influencer for inspiration in creating displays.

Interactive displays may be the new gold standard for RA. It can be argued that any book display that a patron browses or interacts with is an interactive book display. There are varying degrees of interactions which range from stopping, noticing, browsing, selecting, and other clearly interactive responses such as selecting a book, picking up a library freebie, or leaving a comment or review. David Wright adds that, “Some high concept displays are basically mini-programs” (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) and may include props and other attention getters. Interactive book displays do not always even require the use of book copies. RA flow chart displays can fit into small spaces like an end cap or available wall space and engage readers

with a sequential series of RA this-or-that questions such as “tear jerker or a nail biter?” and “adorable or scandalous?” and “Inspirational or hilarious?” (Librarian, 2015) The end points of RA flow charts are pockets with lists of book suggestions. Flow charts can change titles and themes. “Try a New Type of Book” and “Meet Your Next Literary BFF” are RA chart titles used by Karissa, AKA the Ontarian Librarian (Librarian, 2015).

Displays have extra effectiveness when they are not random standalones. Displays can tie to library programs, book award lists, local events, current events, seasons, or even moods and trends on social media. David Wright asserts that the importance of displays is not to look pretty but to create “ways for people to better relate to books” and also for people to relate to the library. (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) The act of curating books for display brings books to the attention of readers in a way that helps make sense of the collection offerings while adding interest and visibility. Librarians planning displays should strive to make them “reader useful” (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019) with a ready supply of next books planned to appeal to readers. Display planning by librarians can be likened to menu planning by chefs looking for the right ingredients that will please and provide the perfect buffet for current appetites.

RA now and future

Readers’ advisory services are known to be an integral part of many librarians’ job description. Simply stated RA services provide help in finding a good book to read. What is not as easily recognizable is the importance of passive RA activities and methods such as book clubs, and book displays for matching readers to their books. Passive RA speaks in a different though effective way compared to a direct RA interview; and in all likelihood passive RA reaches more people. A considerable number of librarians are to be commended for being good readers themselves, offering an increasing selection of book club options, and for displays planned with their readers in mind. Libraries, staffed by librarians who keep

readers reading, and encourage all people to read, strengthen their communities because readers are often the most engaged citizens.

Library RA services are humming along in active and passive forms benefiting readers and their communities. How can the future of strong RA services be insured and the current RA benefits be expanded? For future success of high impact RA, library management should seek to staff RA desks with librarians holding MLIS credentials from an ALA accredited institution (Crowley, 2014). Filling positions with credentialed librarians will supply the library with more RA “experts on staff” (Wyatt, 2021) who are most able to provide strong RA for individuals and for the benefit of the greater community. To achieve the ideal staffing for top-tier RA services, it is also important for coursework in readers’ advisory to be a required part of future LIS curriculums (Crowley, 2014). Once professional librarians are providing RA in the library, taking RA to the “next level” (Dali, 2015) will also depend on continuing education (including multi-cultural components), collecting and using data, and a focus on a collaborative approach. A future with RA embedded across the library (Wyatt, 2021) is a future that is richer and better for individual readers and for communities.

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