

Old Skills and New Practices Mean Radical Change for Library Education

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Technological advances and other societal change have resulted in public libraries' increased reliance on online resources when providing access to information. However, a portion of those served by public libraries includes members of urban poor populations who may prefer to interact with information by talking. How can library educators ensure graduates are prepared to serve these populations? Using the participatory action research method this paper reports the Oral Present research project. This project is part of an on-going study conducted to identify how public libraries studied meet the information needs of this constituency. Results reveal how current service practices involve a radical twist on using traditional collection development skills. Discussion includes recommendations to ensure library education curricula can better prepare graduates for applying age-old professional practices in radical new ways.

Keywords: library services, libraries and metropolitan areas, oral information, urban poor, LIS education, everyday life information

Introduction

Technological proliferation has led to a decrease in ready reference services, including less reference desks, and to public libraries finding technology-based ways to meet patrons' information needs. However, members of urban poor populations in the United States tend to belong to oral cultures, or those that traditionally prefer to interact with information by talking (Heath, 1983; Ong, 2005; Purcell-Gates, 1995). How do librarians in the United States meet the information needs of talkers? The study reported in this paper was developed to increase understanding of (1) this population, (2) how libraries extend services to it, and (3) how people interact with one type of informal, specifically oral, information. By identifying practices that urban public librarians in the United States use to meet urban poor population's information needs, this study provides

recommendations for improvement in this area. Analysis of focus group, interview, and observation data reveals how library and information science (LIS) educators can better prepare librarians for meeting the information needs of those who prefer to interact with oral information. The preliminary findings presented are part of an on-going research project focused on library services extended to the urban poor.

Exploring the Problem in the Literature

Members of underserved within the general populations of the United States include, but are not limited to, families with children (birth to age 17) living below the poverty line (as defined by the American Office of Management and Budget, which implements and enforces Presidential policy and is revised annually in accordance with U.S. code section 9902[2] of title

42), individuals with disabilities, senior citizens, and residents of all ages unable to access library programs and services due to factors including geographic, language/linguistic, technological, and socioeconomic barriers (Minnesota Department of Education, 2007). The study focuses mainly on one underserved U.S. demographic, those considered urban poor. This portion of the population has poor social protection from risk—including limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing (Gilderbloom, 2008). Culture, race, and social psychological factors also contribute to their poverty (Wilson, 1996). African Americans and other minorities are likely to be a part of the urban poor (PEW, 2012). When conducting research on African Americans, DiTomaso (2012) finds that their social and economic status remains unchanged because they routinely lack access to the type of social connections needed to achieve socioeconomic mobility. This research indicates where intervention is needed to positively impact the urban poor.

Evidence of public libraries' on-going interest in those considered underserved can be shown by the way LIS literature refers to the *urban poor* in a broad range of domains: from early-20th-century efforts to "Americanize" immigrants to current efforts to help those disadvantaged, needy, underprivileged, or underserved (Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Learning Resources, 1973; Townes, 2015). More recent efforts to improve quality of life have aimed to get urban poor community members online. Although these efforts have led to some positive outcomes for this population, they fail to improve economic prosperity, political participation, and social interaction systemically (Frisby-Greenwood, 2013; Wolfson, 2013).

The study reported here also emerges from new understandings about oral information, mainly in the western world. This type of information has been categorized as informal information (Case, 2007;

Turner, 2009). People prefer informal information when they want to find out about something new (Daft and Lengel, 1983; Fidel and Green, 2004; Mackenzie, 2005; see also Ikoja-Odongo and Ocholla, 2004). As examples, prenatal women rely on oral information to build relationships with key information providers to become informed (McKenzie, 2009); co-workers use it to build teams and socialize new colleagues (Hall, 1993; Mirivel and Tracy, 2005; Meehan, 2000; Sole and Edmondson, 2002); community members—who rely on old technologies—consider it when deciding whether to adopt new technology like smartphones (Burrell, 2012); and, managers share it to convey important information (Case, 2007; Turner, 2012; Leckie, Pettigrew, and Sylvan, 1996; see also Bhaumik, 2005).

Increasing and facilitating access to online information will not bring about social change for many of these groups. Instead, access to information must be coupled with effective social connections that foster the flow of informal information. This discussion is consistent with the small-world model of information seeking, which posits that people rely on in-network providers of information, usually oral information, over out-network providers (Chatman, 1996, 1992). A key aspect of this model is that community members do not trust outsider information sources.

Method

To learn more about how urban public librarians serve populations that prefer to interact with oral information, the current study design relies on the Participant Action Research (PAR) method (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2014; Kinson, Pain, and Kesby, 2010) to examine and determine how to improve library education curricula. PAR involves relying on researcher and, as appropriate, participant knowledge to arrive at study conclusions. Preliminary data was gathered at the Cleveland Public Library (CPL), a large, urban

system with 27 branches and the first of three research sites. Data sets include interviews with librarian administrators (9), interviews with eligible library users—regardless of whether they use CPL (47), a focus group with representatives (7) from community service organizations (5); and, limited observation data.

Library administrators included administrators charged with system-wide responsibilities and branch managers. Central administrative librarians helped ensure that most data was gathered in or near library locations serving the city's urban poor—the majority of which are African American. Several of these librarians had worked in more than the one capacity since beginning at the library system. The library administrators responded to semi-structured interview questions about what populations the library served, how it worked to meet their information needs, which populations had information needs that were the hardest to reach, and why doing so proved challenging. Librarian participants also suggested potential places to gather data by interviewing eligible library users.

Next, community members provided insight into how they obtained information. To learn from community members who use the library and from those who do not, the researcher interviewed community members inside the library and nearby, or outside of, the library. Three sites were selected for interviews during different times of the day (for safety reasons, no data was gathered after 6pm): a high traffic area of a branch library, a common area of large, senior citizen complex, and a side of a community room in a large church that functions as a community center (for example by hosting events attended by church members and community residents who are not members). Participants responded to structured interview questions about how they resolved a recent situation in which they needed information that they did not have, how they obtained information in general, and whether they used a

library. The participants received their choice of a mini USB flash drive or a can of nuts (both valued at 5 US Dollars) as an incentive for the fifteen to twenty minutes of their time needed for an interview.

Finally in recognition of how initial data gathered revealed persistent cooperation between libraries and community service organizations, data was gathered to learn more about the organizations' roles in meeting the information needs of underserved populations. Specifically, the researcher facilitated a 90-minute focus group with representatives from five different community service organizations. Focus group members responded to semi-structured questions focused on what populations they served, how they advertised their services, how they got information to their target populations, and whether and how the organizations worked with public libraries. Although held in a library facility, the focus group involved no library staff members.

Data was coded to identify emergent themes. Consistent with the PAR methodology, member checking helped ensure accurate analysis of the data and identification of emergent themes.

Results

Data from librarian participants. When asked which constituents they considered underserved, librarian participants replied that underserved community members tend to be from diverse backgrounds, including urban poor. While this included homeless, un- and underemployed, and single parents, most librarian participants (8 of the 9) commented that the hardest to reach within this population were adolescents (including teen mothers), and senior citizens. Most participant librarians (7) continued to describe that a significant portion of those hard-to-reach constituents prefer to interact with oral information.

This finding was reiterated when these participants responded to a question about the best methods used for informing com-

munities they serve about library resources and services. The library uses radio, print, online advertising (including social media), and signage (posters and billboards). Most agreed (7) that using word of mouth—whether ethnic radio stations or local librarians—led to more effective outcomes. One librarian participant attributed this effectiveness to the fact that this method can provide personal referrals to relevant and quality resources: “people are just bombarded with so much [information] all the time . . . if the librarian says ‘hey guys, you should come to this’ then they’ll come.” Others explained that talking with library users proved more effective. Librarians who managed a branch explained that telling library users about programs more routinely resulted in higher attendance than when the library relied solely on traditional delivery methods or social media.

While these initial questions led to information about what underserved populations librarians target and how librarians worked to increase these groups use of the library, remaining questions focused on how librarians worked more directly to meet this population’s information needs. Interview and observation data reveal that practices used to this end include:

1. Engaging members of the urban poor in talk that may seem peripheral to their information need(s);
2. Making certain all levels of staff understand the importance of talking with library users; and,
3. Enlisting community service organizations, with objectives compatible to the library’s, to join in efforts to meet those users’ information needs.

In other words, talking to library users—for example, in a brief greeting or a longer conversation while in front of a public computer—was an important part of information provision typically thought of as being limited to a reference interview.

Additionally, several librarian participants described attending community meetings—held by a range of constituents including community activists, civic administrators, local professionals, social service providers, and volunteers—in order to talk about available library resources. For example, one participant described having regularly attended a local government public meeting and routinely telling meeting participants about recently acquired library books. At one such meeting, she instead shared information about employers who hire felons, which led to an increase in the use of library resources about jobs for former prisoners. The library had always maintained information about resources for former prisoners. However, the librarian’s actions at that meeting seemed to have made a difference in community members’ use of those resources. The data did not indicate whether her presence at multiple meetings was a factor in this outcome. Future research in this area may shed light on this aspect of information provision.

Relying on oral information did not consistently yield expected results. In another example, a librarian talked to teenage girls to encourage them to attend and to ensure attendance at an upcoming library program aimed for this constituent. Despite telling many teen girls repeatedly about the event, a small number attended. However, more teen girls came to the library before and after the event behaving in ways that demonstrated interest in who did attend and what happened during the program. From a traditional standpoint, the low turnout was disappointing. However, the librarian’s word-of-mouth marketing increased the use of the library as a gathering place for teens, which suggested increased interest in and use of the library—a lost battle, but a won war.

Data regarding eligible library users. Comments made by eligible library users’ and observations of library interactions reinforced librarian participants’ comments about urban poor constituents and

oral information. Eligible users who were interviewed inside the library consistently refer to ‘librarians’ even when gesturing to areas of the library—the circulation desk, security staff areas, and community rooms—staffed by non-librarians. And, several librarian participants (3) introduced me to non-librarian staff members in ways that encouraged the subsequent conversation to which those introductions led. Each of those librarians was observed subsequently engaging eligible library users in the same manner that led to those users having similar, brief conversations with non-librarian staff. Two of those librarian participants later explained that taking time to train non-librarian staff on how to greet and talk with library users tended to have a positive impact on overall library use—e.g., the users return for future visits, ask staff for help when they need it, attend programs when library staff suggest they do, etc. This kind of training and outcomes to which it led also reinforced the importance of oral interactions. One librarian commented that not greeting a patron could result in that person leaving and not returning—an outcome she had observed. This evidence of librarians relying on oral information further substantiates research findings regarding small information worlds (Chatman, 1992). By engaging in small talk and reinforcing the importance of talk, librarians become part of their patrons’ small information world.

Data also revealed that this type of engagement extended beyond the library. Specifically, librarian participants described and were observed facilitating conversations between library users and community service organizations. Each librarian participant described coordinating programs during which community service organization representatives could talk with members of the urban poor as a way to meet this constituent’s information needs. Engaging in this manner not only led to meeting immediate information needs, but also to encouraging members of that population to use library resources

again in the future. For example, most eligible library users who used the library and some (interviewed at a non-library location) who did not use the library considered the library as a place in which they could get information they needed.

Finally, data reveal evidence of practices that librarian participants used to manage their efforts to work with community service organizations. Those practices include:

- Monitoring community needs and available community services for meeting those needs;
- Aiming to augment and not duplicate those services;
- Evaluating each community service organization for its dependability, integrity, quality, and stability before establishing a relationship with it;
- Managing library resources (calendars of events, displays, spaces, staffing, etc.) to ensure patrons’ access to community service organizations; and,
- As necessary, changing or ending the library’s reliance on any community service organization for meeting information needs.

Such practice is further informed by information gleaned from library users’ about their information needs, patterns of library resource usage, community demographics, and user feedback. For example, librarian participants, who made arrangements for a community legal organization to provide information to library users on site on a regular basis, planned other library programming to address non-legal topics. Another librarian participant described a need to offer programming that disseminated information about early childhood education when a community organization that had been offering such information and services to the community served by the library lost funding and ceased to exist.

Data regarding community service organizations. Finally, practices that involve

librarians collaborating with community service organizations involve librarians ensuring that the organizations are positioned to provide information to community members. This differs somewhat from how librarians ensure community members' access to and use of information through containers or objects—from books to web sites and more—inside of libraries; representatives from the organizations have a larger role in information delivery and use. Focus group participants described library staff as dependable and knowledgeable individuals whose work ensured the library's reputation as being an accessible, neutral, and safe space. This view informs all the participants' desire to collaborate with libraries.

Focus group participants reached no consensus on which community members were the hardest to reach in part because the organizations provided a range of services—healthy food, legal aid, religious community, safe homes, and youth services. That stated, all participants commented on how the poorest community members proved hardest to serve.

Acknowledging how they collectively offered different but compatible services, the focus group participants expressed the importance of and challenges involved in remaining aware of all the different available services in order to refer their clients and customers as needed. The participants assumed the library maintained this type of awareness as well. In fact, data reveal that effort needed to facilitate these collaborations results in librarians maintaining a complex understanding of community services.

Two focus group participants expressed concerns that the library underutilized its influence and role in the community. The two wondered whether the library could have an even broader impact on the community by repeating successes that occurred inside the library in parts of the community where no library facility was located. Given that observation data did reveal how the library system provides

services outside of its facilities, these final comments suggest that these participants were not aware of the library's efforts in this area. That stated, additional research to investigate comments like these may reveal additional strategies for meeting the information needs of the underserved.

Discussion

The data reveal how librarians' meet the needs of library users who prefer to interact with information by talking mainly by talking with such patrons and by working in ways to ensure staff from other community service organizations can talk to them as well. While librarians talking with patrons and collaborating with community service organizations is hardly new, a closer look at how librarians accomplish these tasks provides insight for library educators who ensure that graduates are prepared to serve urban poor populations. This closer look reinforces assertions that a social component must accompany efforts to make online resources available to community members when working to meet their information needs (Wolfson, 2013).

Themes that emerge from this study lead to questions about how librarians manage and use skills needed to meet the information needs of urban poor library users. At first glance, analysis of the data suggests that the practices noted in the data emerge from trial and error or on-the-job experience. On closer examination, data reveal evidence of librarians using skills taught in LIS programs yet applying those skills in different ways when working with those who prefer to interact with oral information. Evidence of these practices has a number of implications for LIS educators.

Practices involving communication. First, data analysis reveals evidence of librarians using communication skills frequently addressed in LIS curricula, yet more as a resource for business operations (fund raising, managing human resources, performance reviews, problem situations,

reference interviewing, etc.) not for extending public service. Consider how the librarians knew that they needed to talk to certain types of library users and described doing so in such a way that informal greetings, in effect, became an initial part of what may be considered a multi-stage reference encounter (Turner, 2015). Future research in this area may better inform reference interviews and public service. This outcome also suggests that LIS management curricula could be altered to teach LIS students about using communication skills for day-to-day customer relations in addition to business operations. LIS educators can explain the importance of staff being trained to know when to rely on oral or informal information and provide practical examples for applying this knowledge. For example, instructors could teach students that staff changes (departures, new hires, transfers, etc.) could impact some library users' willingness to seek information. Therefore, libraries would do well to find ways to inform the community about such changes in order to ensure some underserved community members will be able to relate to new or departing staff. This approach recognizes library staff as one of the many community resources—along with meeting space and physical collections—that the library makes available. Preparing students to apply managerial skills in such ways is consistent with how Smith (2015) reinforces Cheney's assertion regarding the need for patrons to receive guidance from a librarian in person when seeking information.

Practices involving 'collection planning. Second, the findings suggest that LIS educators can better prepare students to apply another skill, collection planning, in a new way. In an effort to leverage resources needed for meeting the information needs of underserved community members, urban public librarians maintain extensive knowledge about available community service organizations in order to collaborate with those organizations. How do they get this knowledge? The data

in this study reveal that practices used to manage library collaborations with such organizations resemble those used to manage traditional collections (Turner, 2015). Briefly, the librarians identify the desired scope needed for library resources to meet community needs; determine gaps in coverage of existing resources; locate relevant items or community organizations that may help fill those gaps; determine whether and how to collaborate with the organization(s) if criteria warrants (quality of information or services that the organization makes available, dependency of organization representatives, stability of the organization, etc.); and, when needed removes outdated items or ends collaborations with an organization again based on a set of criteria used to evaluate that collaboration. Explained another way, urban public librarians use collection management skills to conduct a type of audit of available community services including by evaluating:

- An organization's purpose (it provides services that urban poor library users need, targets the neighborhood[s] served by that library, is known and trusted in the community, supports civic goals, etc.);
- The quality of service an organization provides (availability and quality of organization informational materials or ability to create opportunities in which library users can talk with organization representatives); and,
- Outcomes yielded from the library's and the organization's combined efforts (increase library usage, leverage available resources, or generate additional resources).

Library users who access community service organizations through library-organization collaborations do so in part because of measures the library takes to ensure the resulting outcomes help sustain the library's safe, neutral, and trusted role within the community. LIS curricula

would do well to prepare graduates to consciously apply traditional collection management skills to manage library efforts to serve the underserved.

Practices involving advocacy. Finally, librarians' use of collection management skills suggests a new strategy that can be used to advocate for the library. Advocacy involves deliberate and sustained efforts to increase understanding of and support for libraries (Stenstrom and Haycock, 2015). LIS educators can help prepare future librarians to use their audit-type understanding of available community services not only to plan library services, but also to help ensure a more informed community. For example, library administrators can report insights learned from what seem to be routine 'community service organization audits' to their parent organizations (typically, a city or county government), other community organizations, and library supporters. Such information could be useful for planning non-information services that impact the library (or the parent organization). For example, sharing this type of information widely may help inform an emerging trend to integrate social services or social workers inside libraries (Nemec-Loise, 2014). Disseminating information about service gaps that exist and how public libraries work to keep track of and fill those gaps would be a way for public libraries to advocate for themselves, in part, by demonstrating how libraries add value to communities they serve (see also Cleveland Public Library, 2012).

Conclusion

Preliminary outcomes of the Oral Present research project suggest that a significant portion of urban poor residents prefer to interact with oral information from trusted, local sources. Findings show how urban public librarians provide this population with access to information by talking, mainly directly with such residents or indirectly by facilitating their conversations with community service organizations,

despite how increasing access to information via technology may undermine such dialog. Analysis of focus group, interview, and observation data suggest that practices used to meet the information needs of those who prefer oral information are likely to not only help meet those needs, but also to provide a way for public libraries to advocate for themselves. Given this suggestion, LIS educators would do well to help prepare future librarians for using advocacy, collection management, and communication skills in two ways. First, learning to apply such skills in the less traditional ways that emerged in the data can ensure librarians will meet the information needs of the urban poor and will better inform the broader public about available services and the library's role in ensuring the community knows that those services are available. Applying these three traditional skills in this new and other innovative ways that more effectively account for all available resources will help sustain the kinds of trusted, local personal network connections that ensure underserved community members, and by association the entire community, can thrive.

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