Educating Collection Developers: A Practitioner's Approach

By Carol Pitts Diedrichs

At last summer's ALA Annual Conference, I served on a panel that considered whether collection development could be taught in library school. My role was to serve as a reactor to presentations by John Budd, a library school professor at the University of Missouri, and Peggy Johnson, then associate director for collection development at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul Campus. [1] Specifically, I was asked to provide the perspective of a practitioner who also teaches collection development. As an acquisitions librarian, not a librarian involved directly in the work of collection development, I also provided the viewpoint of a librarian who must work with a wide range of collection developers having varying levels of education and skill in their field.

The Kent State University, School Of Library And Information Science, Columbus Program

The Columbus program is an extended campus from the library school's main campus in Kent, Ohio. It is managed by a full-time coordinator and three on-site faculty members. They are supported by office staff and have a fully-equipped media lab for the students. The program is located on the Ohio State University campus in Columbus and has a student population of approximately 175. The majority of courses are taught by the full-time professors, but adjunct professors are used, also, as money and expertise permits. Faculty from the Kent campus teach regularly in Columbus, and the Columbus faculty teach regularly in Kent. The core curriculum is exactly the same in Columbus as on the Kent campus. Students may complete their entire degree in Columbus; however, some very specialized electives are only available at one or the other campus within a student's time frame for graduation. In that case, the student must travel to the other campus or forego the elective. No residency is required on the Kent campus.

As an adjunct professor, I've taught Selection and Acquisition of Library Materials once every 12 to 18 months since 1989. When I began, the on-site faculty was smaller and the course was taught exclusively by adjuncts. Several years ago, the on-site faculty was expanded, and a professor specializing in technical services was hired. This has enabled the program to offer the course, which is a very popular elective, more often, with our teaching a section every 12 to 18 months.

Students in the Columbus program usually are commuters who come from outlying areas. Most courses are offered in the late afternoons and evenings once a week. This schedule allows the program to cater to the working student. As a result, most students work full- or part-time in a library, often as staff members, but regularly in positions whose responsibilities we would consider professional. A typical class will meet one evening a week from 6 to 9 p.m. On the day of class, the average student will have worked a full eight-hour day, grabbed a sandwich at a local fast

food establishment and eaten it in the car as they drive anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours to get to class. (It isn't uncommon for that fast food dinner to be consumed as class begins.) After the end of class, the student faces a drive home of the same distance along with the specter of projects, research, reading, and, more recently, e-mail to be read before class the next week.

Course Content

In 40 contact hours, my course attempts to cover the entire realm of collection development as well as acquisitions. Even with the author's personal bias that all collection development librarians are well-served by a solid understanding of the acquisitions process, that is the area which most often receives the most cursory attention. From the outset, this course has covered an overview of collection development, including the philosophy of selection, selection of materials including selection tools and multiple formats, intellectual freedom as it relates to selection, information needs analysis, publishing, acquisitions, budget allocation and fiscal management, collection evaluation, cooperative collection development and resource sharing, automation, and trends. In part as a reaction to the public librarians on this summer's panel, I have since added substantive new sections to the curriculum this year for readers' advisory services, selection of newer formats such as audio books, video, genre literature, and large print, and a selection of electronic resources. With few existing topics that could be eliminated, these new topics put increased pressure on the curriculum.

In addition to traditional lectures, the author makes extensive use of guest speakers to provide variety and differing kinds of expertise to the students. For example, one speaker is the director of academic sales for a major book vendor. He does a general presentation of what book vendors do, what services they provide, and how approval and other selection plans work, without the sales pitch for any particular company. A later class session includes a joint presentation by a serials librarian and a sales manager for a subscription agent. They focus on major serials issues such as pricing, but also cover the working relationship between a serials librarian and a vendor representative. The final guest speaker is a collection development librarian actively engaged in the business of collection development. The individual who spoke to the class was a highlight for the students. She focused on how she does selection, how she keeps up with what is happening in her subject area, and the areas in which her faculty members and graduate students are doing research. She talked about security issues, weeding and storage, as well as how she manages her budget for monographs and serials. The students were full of questions and the session ran 45 minutes longer than planned.

Student Assignments

Student assignments include extensive reading prior to each class (in lieu of a textbook), class participation in discussions, a final examination and three class projects. The first project assigns a selection tool such as *Books in Print, Books for College Libraries,* or *Library Journal* to each student to be evaluated from the collection development/selection perspective and presented to the class. A handout must be prepared for their classmates and an oral presentation (not to exceed 10 minutes) is given. This project has four major advantages:

1. The students must get their hands on the tool and really examine it well enough to prepare

the handout and make the presentation. Even if they have seen these tools in a reference course, they must concentrate on the tool's usefulness in selection.

2. The student must practice the skill of communicating to a group within a time limit.
3. The presentations are more varied than having the professor lecture endlessly about each tool.
4. This assignment provides a ready reference of the major selection tools for each student to refer to when doing later projects.

The single disadvantage to this project is the amount of time devoted to the presentations. With a class size always in the mid-to-high twenties — sometimes as high as 35 students — the in-class presentations consume considerable class time.

I began using a second project this year. From a list of "frequently banned books," each student selects a book for their project. The list includes some adult material, but the majority of titles are for children or young adults. The student had to research the controversy surrounding the book, summarize the issues in a paper, and locate early reviews of the title. Then, they had to put themselves in the position of a selector at the time the book was first published and briefly evaluate how beneficial the reviews would have been in making an informed decision whether to acquire the book. From the class discussion after the project was completed (another consumer of class time), practical aspects of the issues of censorship and selection were highlighted, particularly for children and young adults. This project was due at the same time the Family Friendly Libraries group was organizing a national initiative about issues relating to family values and libraries in nearby Cincinnati. [2]

The final assignment is a term project comprising 40% of the student's grade, an indicator of its importance and the time required to complete it. Each student selects a subject area from an approved list. They are the selector for that subject in a real or imaginary library of their choice. They set the scenario for their library and related assumptions. For example, some gift funds may have been made available to the library to enhance a neglected portion of the collection. They must evaluate the existing collection in their subject using appropriate methods and tools for that purpose, such as list checking. They have been allocated $500 to purchase new material published in the last two years. They must prepare order forms for their selections and write annotations for five of the titles selected. The last part is to explain how they went about doing the assignment, including comments on any selection sources they found to be particularly useful, any gaps in the review coverage of the field, and any special problems they encountered. The completed projects are discussed in class as well as being handed in.

Without exception, the students have found the term project to be extremely worthwhile, though time consuming. Many of them regularly identify it as the most useful assignment in their entire library school careers. At the outset, they are frustrated and struggle with what I really want them to do. They question the limitations of only being able to buy within the last two years (an intentional limit to reinforce the reality of how quickly material goes out of print). Some students struggle with the limit of $500 in subject areas where much material has been published or where material is very expensive, while others cannot find enough new material in their area to obtain five titles for their annotations. They experience frustration with the delay in material being reviewed or titles never being reviewed. They express amazement that anyone could ever select without being able to see the actual book before purchase. They complain about the time involved in tracking down material to purchase, particularly when they are unfamiliar with their subject area. They rail against the editors of selection tools that are not as up-to-date as students

believe they should be. They discover the wisdom of talking to other librarians at their libraries and the advantages of looking at the subject sections in a good bookstore. But most of all, they learn a great deal about the realities of selection.

Practitioner's Reactions

From my experiences with this particular teaching environment, I have several reactions to the issues of educating collection development librarians: =

1. It is impossible to cover of material in this field.
2. Students in this program run the gamut of experience and interest in particular types of libraries. However, most are from public and school environments with some small academic institutions represented as well as the occasional Ohio State University Libraries staff member. It is difficult for a practitioner with experience only in the academic library environment to meet all their expectations.
3. It also is difficult to meet the needs and expectations of students that range from the person with no library back ground to the one who has been running a branch library for the past ten years, but lacked the benefits of a library school education. All students need the theory inherent in this field, but the more experienced ones want information relevant to what they must do today.
4. I learn a great deal from my students. They often have experience in areas that I do not. They often add valuable insights to class discussions, particularly about collection development in the public and school library settings.
5. Teaching challenges the precepts I have held since my own library school education. I can no longer simply say that the acquisition process is more efficient if you order through a vendor. I have to know why I believe that is true and whether it is an accurate statement for all types of libraries.
6. Some of the curriculum is more relevant to some students than others. For example, the intellectual freedom and censorship issues are very interesting and important for the public and school librarians. Those from academic institutions are less interested in these issues and see little relevance to their particular environments. [Editor's note: Challenges to materials in college and university libraries have been documented in the literature, although they do not occur with the frequency or regularity as challenges to materials in the other settings.]
7. The completely inexperienced student can be overwhelmed in this class because of the volume of material to be covered as well as the dominance of the students who have experience. When the majority of students are experienced and familiar with library lingo, it is easy for the instructor to build on that knowledge rather than cover the basics in detail for novices.
8. I believe the practitioner's influence is a useful one in this particular class. I do teach the theory of selection and collection development and then contrast that with many of the realities in today's libraries.

Conclusion

The theme running throughout this paper is whether collection development can be taught in library school. I believe that it can and should be taught, but only when coupled with class components that help to bring theory into reality. The primary challenge is the volume of material to be covered, especially when you try to address the differences and issues relevant to various types of libraries. John Budd argued that specific aspects of collection development can be handled in type-of-library courses. [3] I agree that is one approach, but it's impossible to know what combination of courses any given student will take. Also, students may have spent their entire pre-professional career in one type of library only to find that the professional positions they are offered after they complete their degrees is in a different type. If their collection development course didn't cover both environments, and they didn't take any type of library courses, they are out of luck!

Footnotes

1. Peggy Johnson, "Mastering Collection Development: A Continuum," *Technicalities* Vol. 15, no. 10 (October 1995): p. 1,6,8-9.
2. Evan St. Lifer and Michael Rogers, "Family Friendly Libraries Attacks ALA in City Meeting," *Library Journal* 120 (November 15,1995): p. 12-13.
3. John M. Budd, "Education for Collection Development," presentation made at ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois, June 26, 1995.