

Difficult Library patrons in academe: It's all in the eye of the beholder

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Published in: Reference Librarian v. 36, nos. 75/76, 2002, 45-54
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ABSTRACT:

Difficult patrons have been considered primarily from the perspective of the problem behaviours they present in libraries. Many have attempted to define the problem patron and to provide advice and develop guidelines for frontline public service staff. To understand the difficult patron in academic libraries we need to answer three questions – How well do we know our patrons? Do we unwittingly create difficult patrons through our failure to appreciate their needs? Do we regard patrons as difficult because the way they use libraries and conduct their information research does not match our idea of how it should be done? The answers to these questions suggest that we need to reconceptualize both our patrons and the services we provide. Library staff need to see difficult patrons not as problems but as challenges to the service ideas and standards we hold. A paradigm shift is necessary if we are to reconstruct our beliefs about our patrons, their information seeking behaviours and the services we provide to meet their needs. Some strategies for developing the skills of library staff to work effectively with difficult patrons are presented.

Keywords: Library patrons, Library staff – training and development, Library services, Library instruction, Technology and libraries, Problem patron

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Introduction

Much of the literature on difficult library patrons describes and categorizes those patrons according to the nature of their problem behaviours – the relatively harmless nuisance, the disruptive, or the violent (Shuman, 1989, Cuesta, 1996). Shuman (1989) acknowledges that attempts to define the problem patron are elusive, imprecise, and difficult and suggests that even a comprehensive definition of a problem patron as “anyone who visits the library and either breaks or flouts existing rules, or presents an actual or potential threat to other persons” may not necessarily fit a particular person or behaviour.

In academic libraries today we need to consider more broadly the question of what constitutes a difficult patron. In my library for example, some of the most difficult library patrons are the mature age students returning to studies after many years. What makes them difficult? For many of them the current technological environment presents a significant barrier to learning. At the other end of the patron continuum are the technologically competent high school graduates. These patrons are difficult because of their total embrace of technology - their tendency to go straight to the Web bypassing traditional methods of doing library research. Each of these patron groups are difficult for very different reasons. In an attempt to understand the “difficult” patron in academic libraries we need to address three questions:

- How well do we know our patrons?
- Do we unwittingly create “difficult” patrons through our own failure to understand and meet their needs?
- Do we regard patrons as difficult because they do not conform to our view of how information research “should” be conducted?

How well do we know our patrons?

In academic libraries we often fail to acknowledge and therefore effectively deal with the fact that our patrons are ever-changing and constantly pose new challenges for librarians. Patrons vary considerably in their abilities and skill level to work with the technology. One of the significant challenges comes in working with the current “cut and paste generation” of library patrons (Roth, 1999). These patrons are “difficult” customers for a variety of reasons not the least of which is their preference for conducting all their information research surfing the Web. This “remote control/mouse click” generation is not interested in any of the conventional methods of doing library research. Students grow up with Sega, Nintendo and the World Wide Web. They tend to be familiar and comfortable with computers and expect immediate feedback from interactive systems. They certainly do not want to take time to learn - they just want to sit down and get the information. Stoffle (1996) observes that patrons have become customers who are more discriminating and demanding. They have increasing options and alternatives such as online information systems marketed directly to the public. As a result their expectations of library service and response times have escalated, fueled by a culture of instant gratification. We tend to regard these patrons as “difficult” because of their preference for doing all their information research via the Internet and because of their expectations of instant access to and supply of information.

At the same time we are also working with patrons who are the reluctant or inexperienced users of technology. They are faced with working in a library environment characterized by what Becker (1991) calls the pervasive effect of “creeping featurism”. Databases are added, products are enhanced, sophisticated searching options are enabled or software is completely updated almost daily. Any one of these by itself may seem like a good idea but the cumulative effect of many minor

improvements or the trauma of a major upgrade can be most disheartening for patrons and staff alike.

For these patrons “confronted” by the need to work with technology – library systems, electronic databases and Internet searching, for example - learning anxiety can be significant. Patron anxiety in information seeking situations is well documented (Keefer, 1993, Kuhlthau, 1991, Mellon, 1988, Ford, 1980). That anxiety interferes with the mental and creative processes required for information searching. The operational or physical aspects of the search process are also easily degraded by the stress and anxiety of learning the ropes of a new and unfamiliar system. Keefer (1993) suggests that because the affective aspects are always part of any human activity involving the learning of new skills, a large part of what we do at the reference desk in academic libraries must include helping patrons understand the normality of their frustration with the system. Letting patrons know that everybody experiences anxiety and that asking for help is an important part of the search process can go a long way toward making patrons’ initial library experiences less stressful. These patrons can be seemingly “difficult” or demanding to library staff because of their expectations of or need for extensive help in working with the technology and retrieving information.

Do we unwittingly create “difficult” patrons through our failure to appreciate their needs?

It is useful to know our patrons in terms of the various difficulties they present. We must also ask the question: how well do we design library services and implement systems based on a sound understanding of what our patrons need or are prepared to use? There are those (Lewis, 1990, Cargill, 1992) who have urged librarians to watch and listen to patrons and try to understand what their words and their actions say about how our libraries work and what they feel is important. This

is necessary if we are to organize services to meet the actual information needs, habits and preferences of patrons – not what librarians think is wanted. In the context of library instruction Bessler (1990) suggests it is time to stop trying to teach patrons and to focus more effort on listening. Instead of working to create incentives for patrons to act the way we feel is in their best interests librarians should learn more about the value the patron places on different services and develop these accordingly.

We need to engage in an ongoing process of re-defining our patrons and be willing to examine and legitimize their needs and expectations for library service. Without this we continue to experience patrons as difficult simply because their expectations for service are not met by our service provisions. Consider the patrons who expect to use library computers for unlimited Internet and e-mail use, to download and print full text documents, to order electronic documents online and receive them immediately. How well do our policies and services accommodate and keep pace with these and other evolving expectations of our patrons? We will be positioning our libraries and our services well if we maintain the ability and the willingness to approach patron needs and requests with an open mind and consider the merits of extending, adapting, and developing library services to meet these.

Do we label patrons as difficult because they do not conform to our view of how information research should be conducted?

In addition to rethinking and legitimizing patron needs and developing appropriate and relevant services, we need to re-examine our ideas of how information research is “best” conducted. Are we guilty of regarding patrons as “difficult” because the way they use libraries and look for information does not match our idea of how it “should” be done in an academic library?

The debate in the literature about academic librarians immersing themselves in the cause and processes of user education (Bessler, 1990) raises important questions about why we provide library instruction and what we think patrons need to learn. Has instruction become necessary because the systems, electronic products, search software which libraries provide do not address patrons' access and content needs? Rettig (1995) describes library instruction as a remedial response to the library systems' failures or deficiencies. The present model of library instruction assumes that the library system is deficient and that patrons are not capable nor self-sufficient and are in need of remediation (Herrington, 1998). The real problem here is that while technology has thrust the library into the electronic information age our models of service delivery have not changed. What is needed is a paradigm shift – not only a change in procedures and methods but also the reconstruction of reality and beliefs – especially our beliefs about how our patrons should conduct their information research.

Rudd and Rudd (1986) discuss the tendency of patrons to only acquire a satisfactory subset of the amount of information available - Herbert Simon's (1997) "satisficing" principle. Librarians must accept that this shorthand way of finding, scanning, and organizing information is the modus operandi of the majority of our patrons. Librarians must recognize and accept this minimalist approach to information retrieval and adapt our service delivery and library instruction to accommodate this way of doing research.

Responding to the difficult patron requires an attempt to re-conceptualize our service.

In re-thinking the difficult patron, the first step for library staff is to view these patrons not as "problems" to be tolerated but as challenges to the service ideas and standards we hold. If we focus on actual patron needs we can begin to consider alternative approaches, seek products to

meet differing needs and review the effectiveness of library services for their relevance. We can consider whether the technology actually enhances our services, whether patrons are equipped to take full advantage of new services and if not what strategies we should employ to teach their use.

To begin with we should identify where the difficult patron is the result of a failure of the library to match service to needs. We are at a point in the ongoing evolution of libraries where a reconfiguring of our services is appropriate if not mandatory. Denham (1995) comments on the tremendous changes in society which affect the entire concept of what a library is and does. Expansion in the variety of information formats, increased competition and the impact of technologies all give libraries the opportunity to redesign their own future. Stoffle (1996) talks about the need for transformational change in libraries to achieve breakthrough performance and claims the most fundamental change that has to occur is a switch to a focus on customers and need. All services and activities must be viewed through the eyes of the patrons, letting them determine quality by whether their needs have been satisfied. To achieve this libraries must move away from a staff performing narrow tasks according to prescribed policies and procedures to one empowered to make daily decisions about what work to do and how to do it in a way that results in satisfied patrons and constantly improving processes. Ultimately the academic library must change because its patrons need it to change.

There are those who advocate a paradigm shift for library instruction (Rettig, 1995, Bessler, 1990) claiming we need a new model that is not based on a remedial response to the library systems' failures or deficiencies. Librarians need to design systems which give patrons a feeling of control, systems that are so easy to use there is no need for instruction. While our philosophy in academic library reference continues to be instructing the patron in how to obtain information, we teach this today in a context in which technology increasingly allows the patron to hopscotch through the

mechanics of how to find the information and reach the information quickly. If we acknowledge this, we then have the opportunity to impact on our patrons' chances for success in locating and managing information. For example we can draw upon their familiarity with new technologies, with surfing the Web and teach them how to apply those "Web skills" to other resources (Curl, 2000). Using this approach we can concentrate on teaching them to effectively articulate their information need, identify appropriate resources, evaluate what has been retrieved and redirect their continued searching. Wallace (1999) observes that technology training requires an understanding of when and how to use it with patrons. It involves observing the information-seeking behaviours of our patrons and adapting our resources and services. For Library staff just having a sense of where patrons are in this process can be of immense value when planning information services.

Implications for staff

It is clear from these statements about the need for change, for reconceptualizing both our patrons and our service offerings, that we need to consider what this means for our library staff. For Library support staff, changes in the workplace have resulted in those staff assuming an ever-increasing range of responsibilities. As Berger (1997) observes a simple look back over the past 10 years reveals a vigorous revolution in the relationship between library professionals and their support staff in terms of the re-distribution and assignment of duties. In the digital world most of us are wrestling with the issue of getting our staff at all levels properly trained so that they feel comfortable in this new technologically advanced working environment. We recognize the "unending new technology readiness training" (Wallace, 1999) needed in the library and the role librarianship has in demystifying information technologies for patrons. It is imperative that library managers prepare these staff to work effectively in the new roles they have undertaken. Working directly with patrons

assisting them with the use of library search systems, databases and the Internet requires substantial training and skill development.

In order to develop relevant services and provide sound training for our patrons and thereby avoid situations that produce difficult patrons, we first need to develop the confidence and competencies in staff necessary to make intelligent decisions about what our patrons need to know and about effective strategies for teaching those skills. The training of competent and effective public service staff is critical to the perceived effectiveness of the library. Our patrons' perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of the library and their satisfaction with library services are based primarily on their interaction with our public service staff. Patrons who receive consistently effective service and are treated as though their needs are significant will be more likely to perceive the library as an effective, responsive organization (Hobson, 1987).

Conclusion: Responding to the Difficult Patron

So how do we ensure that our libraries are prepared and our staff are ready to respond to the difficult patrons? The unifying theme in all the writings about problem patrons is an attempt to prepare library staff for the unexpected so that when it happens staff will have some notion of what to do about it. The first step in training staff to deal with problem patrons should be to ensure that staff are familiar with the "rules" or policies (both legal and ethical) governing the operation of the library, and that they have a general sense of what may and may not be done concerning problem patrons and behaviours of various types. Morrisett (1996) advocates the development of a patron behaviour policy, one which protects the rights of both library patrons and library staff, provides a uniform standard of behaviour and sets out clear guidelines defining inappropriate behaviour and a course of action for library staff to follow.

Secondly, it is imperative that library managers implement a training program to help staff engage in diagnosis and prevention of problem situations. The primary objective of any staff training is to bring about change, whether an increase in knowledge, the acquisition of a skill, or the development of confidence and good judgement. Knowledge is the information needed to perform a set of activities well; skills are the techniques, methods and strategies which put knowledge into practice and abilities are intangible qualities such as cooperation, flexibility, motivation and enthusiasm (Creth, 1986). Much has been written about the knowledge, skills and abilities required of library public services staff to provide effective services to users (Conroy, 1978, Creth, 1986). To manage those interactions with difficult patrons staff require such traits as strong verbal communication skills, interpersonal skills, good listening skills, tact, patience and perseverance as well as more specific skills such as problem solving/analytical skills, computer skills associated with database searching, and automated systems expertise and so on. Smith (1996) strongly advocates the use of active listening (hearing and responding to the feelings and meaning behind patrons' words) as a means of gaining some insight into the behaviour of the difficult or critical patron. Hobson et al (1987) developed a training program which provided staff with an awareness of their critical role in the overall functioning of the library, taught specific verbal and nonverbal behaviours essential in providing positive, helpful and friendly service to patrons and introduced them to interpersonal strategies and operational procedures for handling stressful situations. Effective training along these lines not only helps staff cope with patron behaviour but also teaches staff awareness of their own attitudes and encourages them to maintain a professional detached manner. Staff need to know that dealing with problem patrons requires tact, firmness, understanding, quick-thinking, resourcefulness, courage, sympathy and sometimes a sense of

humour (Shuman (1989). Cuesta (1996) reminds us that in most instances it is the judgement and common sense of the staffer that will determine the outcome of any patron interaction.

Thirdly, as a management strategy the concept of staff empowerment has merit and is worthy of consideration here. Well-trained public service staff possess the flexibility needed for resolving service problems they encounter. Decision-making authority therefore should be extended to the lowest level possible so that staff involved in direct contact with patrons possess the ability to make those decisions that directly affect their operations, their patrons and themselves (Millson-Mantula,1995).

Finally we should make a conscious effort to achieve a win-win situation in all our patron interactions. This requires a focused effort to achieve an understanding of patron needs and develop services that meet those needs. All public service staff should be familiar with the best techniques for connecting patrons with what they need. Staff must be prepared to handle the vast personality differences, the various learning styles and the differing research needs of the library's patrons. Our goal is to earn the confidence of patrons through relationships built over time (Dodsworth, 1998). Ultimately our success will be measured by the disappearance of difficult patrons from our libraries.

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