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2008

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Citation Information

Del Bosque, D. C., Chapman, K. (2008). Users 2.0: Technology at your service. In Roy Tennant, *Technology in libraries: Essays in honor of Anne Grodzins Lipow* 49-55.

http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/lib_articles/52

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Users 2.0: Technology at Your Service

Darcy Del Bosque and Kimberly Chapman

It is exciting, as practicing librarians, to find a singular voice that stands out as a strong influence on the profession. Anne Grodzins Lipow provided one such voice, inspiring us to evaluate our philosophy of patron service and helping us define our professional values. Lipow's body of work encompasses many contemporary library issues, involving myriad aspects of customer service. Lipow addressed issues including patron-friendly catalogs and reference service in both traditional face-to-face and newer virtual settings, recognized the importance of training staff as part of continuous improvement in customer service, and emphasized the power of using technology to improve delivery of library services. As trends and technologies have evolved, Lipow successfully articulated how those changes could be integrated into the traditional library organization. Her position regarding library issues, including the importance of the "human factor" in reference service, has helped us shape our patron-centered service philosophy. This has impacted the reference service we strive to provide, the issues we advocate for, and the environments in which we work.

As our careers have developed, we have collaborated on a variety of projects and had countless discussions about librarianship. Through practical experience, networking with colleagues, and reading in the professional literature, we have formed ideals of what user service should

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Technology in Libraries: Essays in Honor of Anne Grodzins Lipow, ed. Roy Tennant. Lulu.com, 2008.

look like. During several of our projects, the ideas expressed in Anne Lipow's work have risen to the top to fuel our discussions. Many themes that Lipow discussed are evident in the philosophy of reference that guides us today. This philosophy encompasses the belief in assisting our patrons at their point-of-need, wherever that may be: whether they are physically in the library; outside of the library in other campus facilities; or using library resources and services in the online environment. We believe, as is well expressed in Lipow's writings, in striving to remove barriers, focusing on useable interfaces (e.g. catalogs, websites) and designing approachability into everything that we do: from training library staff to provide excellent customer service in person; to designing usable websites and taking full advantage of social networking software; to being out-and-about in the community as friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable resources. Putting this philosophy into action requires both understanding and mitigating the barriers encountered by patrons.

The goal — and the challenge inherent in that goal — of replacing a library-centered philosophy with a patron-centered philosophy is discovering what barriers exist from the user's perspective, and finding solutions that fit the user's way of life, to provide unimpeded access to a library's collections and services. A library's physical location can be a primary obstacle preventing patrons from getting materials and services they need, when they need them. Lipow understood this dilemma from the patron's viewpoint, stating that "...rather than thinking of our users as remote, we should recognize that we are remote from our users"⁴³. Although libraries now have electronic means, with the advent of e-books and article databases, of delivering materials to "remote" users, the concept of providing materials to patrons who could not make it to the library is not new. Bookmobiles and sending books via the postal service removed physical barriers by transporting materials directly to patrons; phone reference allowed patrons to call in and get assistance without visiting the library facility. Current methods of addressing the physical limitations of the library include delivering materials electronically to patrons. Providing digital

⁴³ Lipow, Anne G. "In Your Face' Reference Service," *Library Journal*, 124(13) (August 1999), p. 50-52.

reference services, about which Anne Lipow wrote a great deal, allows patrons to get answers from librarians using their own computers. Initially, digital reference services included email and chat reference. Many libraries have discovered that commercially-vended software products used to interface with patrons was not convenient to patrons' online habits. As librarians realized they could reach patrons more efficiently in the virtual environments patrons were using for other activities, instant messaging (IM) has become a free alternative to commercial software. This transition echoes Lipow's desire to embrace the use of new technology, while emphasizing the need of implementing technology to serve patron needs, rather than having technology drive our interactions with patrons. Instead of encouraging the patron to go to a library space that they would not otherwise use, the use of IM puts the librarian seamlessly into the patron's space, removing barriers to access. A further evolution currently being tested by many libraries is the move to providing reference via cell phone by allowing patrons to text their questions. UC Merced has pioneered this type of service allowing them to answer questions anywhere, anytime ⁴⁴.

Lipow's work resonated with our user-centered philosophy as we participated in developing a librarian-on-location service, another example of removing barriers between patrons and the library. Campus wireless networks made it possible for students to access library resources from their laptops anywhere on campus; the wireless networks also made it possible for librarians to leave the library building. Librarians became "mobile," visiting various campus locations to meet students on their own turf. Reference service provision and library outreach are intertwined in this setting, increasing approachability and convenience for patrons. Lipow noted the transition to providing service to patrons in their own spaces saying, "In the physical library, the most exciting reorganization of reference service is being done by those in academic libraries who have moved their offices out of the

⁴⁴ Carlson, S. "Are Reference Desks Dying Out?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(33) (7/25/2007), p. A37.

library and into their constituencies' domain."⁴⁵ Lipow adds "The numbers of these in-your-face librarians – that is, librarians who cannot be overlooked or ignored – are steadily growing." In our case, technology removed barriers between us and the populations we served, allowing our campus librarians to provide reference services at the users' point-of-need. This combination of outreach and reference promoted the visibility of the library and its resources.

As the shift to user-focused thinking is undertaken, it becomes easy to see the value of bringing library resources to the user. In addition to the importance of user-focused services, Lipow pushed us in our thinking about the future of the library. Lipow's visualizations of libraries of the future emphasized her awareness that libraries were changing and that librarians needed to embrace the new developments. She stated, "What is new in any library is the pace of change: in the last 10 or so years our occupation – the tools we use to accomplish our mission, the mission itself, and even the patrons we serve – has been changing at a rate faster than it has changed in all previous decades combined; and there is no let-up in sight."⁴⁶ True to her statement, technological forces have continued to force librarianship to look at its role in society and make decisions on the ways it will adapt.

Librarians have had different reactions to the forces that are changing the profession. Some librarians have dug themselves in, clinging to the traditions of the past and unwilling to adapt to the changing environment, trying to train patrons in using outdated systems. Other librarians have taken a wait-and-see attitude, implementing new technologies after seeing them work successfully in other libraries or industries. Another approach has been to implement everything new; jumping from one project to the next as something more cutting-edge comes along. The wide range of reactions in the profession has led to uneven services in libraries, leaving librarians unsure of what to provide, and patrons unsure of what to expect.

Change is inevitable; organizations must continually reevaluate and assess how to adapt effectively to change. However, the pace of change does

⁴⁵ Lipow, Anne G. "In Your Face' Reference Service," *Library Journal*, 124(13) (August 1999), p. 50-52.

⁴⁶ Lipow, Anne G. "Training For Change: Staff Development In A New Age," *Journal of Library Administration*, 10(4) (1989), p. 87-97.

not dictate that we abandon all the foundations of our profession and just haphazardly embark on the next shiny new thing. It is important to remember the guiding principles of librarianship, moving services forward in changing environments to best meet the information needs of our patrons. Just as Lipow has inspired us to create a philosophy of user service, she has also encouraged the constant reevaluation of these underlying beliefs. She states, "In reality, of course, it isn't possible to 'continue as we have.' So how do we ensure that we move forward, and not backward? We must take stock of what it takes to meet the patrons' expectation and offer new and properly staffed services that satisfy those expectations."⁴⁷ New technologies provide exciting new possibilities and librarians must evaluate, implement, and reevaluate services to ensure the best service is being provided for patrons using appropriate technologies.

Discovering where patrons spend time can help incorporate the library into spaces where services will actually be used. If users are hanging out in Second Life or MySpace, a library presence in those spaces can help reach a group of patrons that otherwise might not use library services. Lipow leads us to search for the juncture of new and old that best meets patron needs saying, "The experts in how to stay in business in a changing world say that you need to find your niche." The niche of the library can be found by careful consideration of where we have been and where patrons need us to be in the future. If we focus on a foundation of user services, technology can be evaluated based on user needs and other core values of the organization. When technology is a good fit in those areas it can be adapted alongside other services. As we move beyond virtual reference, virtual libraries and even beyond the latest Web 2.0 initiatives, what do libraries need to focus on in relation to technology to ensure we hold onto our traditional values while moving forward? Lipow suggests that we need to think about where, "... we fit in a world that has Yahoo! and online reference services provided by commercial firms...?"⁴⁸ As change occurs we should not

⁴⁷ Lipow, Anne G., "The Online Catalog: Exceeding Our Grasp," *American Libraries*, 20 (1989), p. 865.

⁴⁸ Lipow, Anne G., & Schlachter, G. A. "Thinking out loud: Who Will Give Reference Service in the Digital Environment?" *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 37(2) (1997), p. 129.

be fearful of moving forward, but not rush forward without careful consideration about the best direction for the library of the future.

Lipow's writings about the libraries of the future included discussion of how to utilize current technologies in innovative ways, or depictions of best practices for the library of the future. Describing the possible partnership of the library with researchers she stated, "This scenario requires no technological development other than extension of what is available today."⁴⁹ Again she inspires librarians to focus on how the library can take current technology and utilize it in unique ways for the support of the patron. By adapting technology to best meet users' needs and focusing on traditional core values, the library is able to find its unique niche and distinguish itself from other providers such as Wikipedia and Yahoo! Answers. Librarians should avoid implementing technology for technologies sake; yet also avoid becoming stagnant and not moving forward. Often there can be internal and/or external pressure to implement the newest technology. However, if technology is not supporting user needs effectively, efforts to focus on other initiatives that better serve patrons are warranted. The evaluation of core values and future technologies is also helpful to organizations that are reluctant to give up previous technologies that may have outlasted their usefulness...for example, subscriptions to commercially-vended chat reference products. By investigating new technologies in relation to core values and user needs, librarians can often be spurred to take the first step in the next direction, striking a balance between the implementation of technology, and the end result of meeting users' needs via the technological tools provided.

Anne Grodzins Lipow's impact on the library profession is certainly greater than the impact on two librarians who are early in their careers — yet it is by personalizing the impact of her work on our philosophy that we can truly appreciate her contributions. Anne Grodzins Lipow's ideas remain with us, in our writing, in the service we provide to our patrons, and in our thoughts about the future of the profession. The legacy of an excellent librarian is not just in the people they meet and serve, but in the

⁴⁹ Lipow, Anne G., & Rosenthal, J. A. "The researcher and the library: A partnership in the near future." *Library Journal*, 111 (1986), p. 156.

ideas that inspire those who follow after. Anne Grodzins Lipow reminds us to keep our priorities straight and focus on harnessing technology to serve our users more effectively — not just because the latest technology is hip!