Handing the Keys to the Patron: Where Will PDA Drive Us?

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The purpose of this presentation is to raise some questions about the wisdom of employing PDA to build library collections. PDA is often regarded as a panacea for library acquisitions in an era of shrinking budgets and reduced buying power. PDA seems to offer an efficient alternative to traditional collection development (TCD) since it insures that the books purchased are the books used. As Ward, for example, puts it: “unfortunately many librarians find it difficult to break decades of just-in-case acquisitions habits; they now frequently buy e-books outright rather than fully embracing the just-in-time patron-driven acquisitions model which defers purchase until the moment of need which, for thousands of titles, may never come” (31).

Question #1/ Rhetoric 101: “Just in time” vs. “Just in case”

These pithy formulae have caught on as ways of characterizing the two different models of collection building. I contend that they are tendentious, skewing our understanding of the two opposed models right from the start.

“Just in time” –
connotations: *responsive, efficient, frugal*

“Just in case” –
Connotations: *cautious, indulgent, unthrifty*

These labels, which now enjoy general currency in the library world, narrowly focus on the putative timing of the use of the acquired item. But if instead one focuses on the kind of collection that might result from each of the two methods of acquisition building, the labels might be different:

For PDA, because items are inquired by patrons, whose grounds for selection might be idiosyncratic or just uninformed, the resulting collection could be characterized as:

“An Assortment of Leftovers.”

For TCD, the aim has always been to create a collection that is “A Record of Knowledge.”

Question #2 PDA and the problem of the 20-80 problem

A
In a seminal article in 1969, Richard Trueswell formulated the rough rule that 20% of the books in a library collection account for 80% of the total circulations (and that 50% account for 90%). This has been known as Trueswell’s rule in the library literature; generally it has been deemed to point to an efficiency problem: if only we could determine in advance which 20% of the books were going to garner that 80% of circulations, think of the money we’d save!

PDA would seem to address this problem directly, as it insures that a book bought is a book “used.”

But...

- Is Trueswell’s problem, as it is often referred to, really a problem?
- Does Trueswell’s law hold for only really large collections?
- Looked at holistically, it may be that one needs a certain critical mass of books before one achieves a rate at which 20% of the books account for 80% of the circulation. Certain books get used because many other books are there; and the ones used may vary as the population of users varies, from library to library and from era to era.
- The visible existence of the collection as such may encourage borrowing. If a patron knows that a library is well furnished he can expect to find materials that will satisfy his information need, whatever it may be; this expectation would be premised on such factors as size, prior experience, and an operative definition of a library as a site dedicated to containing a record of knowledge (see question #1, above), all of which give the patron confidence that may fruitfully delve for materials in its precincts.

Question #2 B

Does PDA really address Trueswell’s problem (if it is a problem)?

Sens and Fonseca (2012) make the following important criticism of arguments for PDA: Since the first circulation (of whatever length) is guaranteed, the real measure of PDA as a collection-building strategy, rather than as a book-buying service, is whether the books acquired through this method receive a higher rate of second circulations than books purchased through the established method. Several studies claim that this is so, by a slight margin, but Sens and Fonseca point out that these studies do not account for the number of times the same patron uses the book he has selected, which may be considerable.

Moreover, I would add that this brings up the problem of how e-book circulations are counted versus the way those for physical books are counted: if a faculty member can have a book for 6 months (the loan period at the University of Oregon, for example), that counts as one circulation; on the other hand, what counts as an e-book circulation may be as little as a five-minute perusal.

Question #3

What sort of collection might result in the long-term if PDA is the primary means of selection?

From 2011-2015 The Orbis Cascade Alliance implemented a PDA pilot program across its 38 institutions. Over the 5 years during which this program was conducted, the number of uses that triggered a purchase varied, being at times as low as 5 and rising in the end to 15.

Although textbooks were expressly excluded from the purchasing program, an informal analysis of the top 500 titles acquired in this way shows a heavy preponderance of textbooks both in the restricted sense and in the broader sense of books used for courses (general treatments, surveys introductions, handbooks, guides, companions, etc.).

Question #3 continued...

This is in keeping with the dominant profile of the Alliance institutions, a high percentage of which identify as either “exclusively,” “very high,” or “high” “undergraduate institutions,” with less than ¼ {9 of them} identified as “majority undergraduate”).

For comparison, I looked at the titles classified as literature that were used (though not necessarily purchased) at the University of Oregon for the FY15: a small amount of titles (198 out of the 14,869 unique titles used by the Alliance during that period) across all fields in the category (English, Classics, East Asian, etc.) fell into this category. It is hard to generalize on the basis of so small a sample; the titles represented a wide array of subjects. However, certain “hot topics,” such as ecocriticism, contemporary popular literature, comics studies were among the subject areas that stood out. This makes the results useful as a gauge of where more collection development efforts might be targeted.

However, as a subject specialist I got no sense that the titles acquired by means of the PDA program made for anything more than a smattering of nonce items that served a patron’s one-time need; or that they would form a deep collection that would serve future needs. While it should be borne in mind that the PDA program was implemented across a range of institutions with different user populations and never intended as anything more than a supplement to existing collections and ongoing “traditional” approaches to selection, the very thin occurrence of scholarly monographs among the results does not warrant belief that PDA could serve as a general means of acquisition, at least not for a library that aspires to “research-level” status. ***The underlying question, more philosophical than empirical, is what makes a collection a collection? Or, more radically, what is a library?***

Bibliography:

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