
What about User Services?

Putting the US in RUSA

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The R in RUSA often overshadows the US. I'm not being cute here and talking about us (although we are important). The US in RUSA that is missed by many librarians, particularly those not involved in RUSA, is User Services. RUSA has a lot going on in user services, just as most libraries have many user services that they provide. User services are everywhere, yet they can be a little difficult to call out and to find.

Reference is itself a user service—it is just the one that has historically gotten the most attention. Reference has been an identified service since before Samuel Green wrote about it in 1876.¹ Reference has also been the focus of a lot of research and a lot of librarian education in the last one hundred years. We each know, and more or less all agree, on what reference is. Despite varying definitions,² librarians agree on it enough to consider it a single thing. Reference has changed, even in the fifteen years I've been a librarian, but it is still our firstborn, just maybe grown up a little and with some independence. We honor it in our libraries with service desks and departments. We place high expectations on it and are disappointed when it doesn't measure up.

But what about *user services*? I've even spent the last paragraph talking about reference in a column on user services! User services in our profession is underappreciated and sometimes misunderstood. It might be difficult to get agreement on what constitutes user services. Is it the same as public services? Access services? There isn't a tidy, set definition—not from RUSA and not from any group. Looking at library websites does not lead us to a definition-in-practice as there is no uniformity: not all libraries have something they call “user services,” and for those that do there is variation in what is included. In short, user services can be unruly and the boundaries are not always clear. What is user services up to?

GROWING IMPORTANCE OF USER SERVICES

It reminds me of a family I grew up with: the eldest child was brilliant and talented and well behaved. The second child was smart and capable, if somewhat frustrating and unpredictable at times. But while parents and teachers were looking at the older child, the younger went and became a doctor much to the surprise of just about everyone. Some people take more time to come into their own.

User services has always been a part of libraries, whether it has been defined as a set of services or not. In the past two decades as many libraries experienced a decline in their reference interactions and a change in the information-seeking

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patterns of their patrons, user services became a larger focus. Innovation in user services goes back further than the twenty years of the Internet. Community information files were a trend in the 1970s; today, libraries provide information on the Affordable Care Act and are places for IRS tax volunteers to meet with the elderly. My local library loaned art and posters in the 1980s; now there are libraries loaning tools and cake pans. Libraries were early providers of computers for personal use, and this continues to be an important role for libraries, particularly as we try to bridge the digital divide.

The library is a growing organism, one that develops along with our communities and our patrons. Changes in our local economies and changes in information-seeking behaviors beget new user services. User services are important to our community and are often called out when defending libraries against closure—particularly access to computers, job-finding assistance, and other community-focused services. We are at a time of great opportunity and great need for user services in our libraries and in our communities, and RUSA is right alongside librarians, sharing best practices, providing training, and fostering discussion. Below is an overview of some of the major areas of user services and a sampling of RUSA's activities in these areas. I cannot cover everything, and there is always room in RUSA for new ideas, so if something is missing I invite you to explore whether it exists in RUSA, and if it does not, to help create it.

USER SERVICES FOR GROUPS: PROGRAMMING AND INSTRUCTION

Programming is a sprawling area and one that is particular to each library. Programming is where libraries really tailor themselves to the needs of their community, or subsets of their community. Financial literacy is a growing area for programming. Arts events, community debates and town halls, workshops on job-hunting—this could be an endless list. Programming is usually done for groups but can have components that are one-on-one, such as with job-seeking assistance that might arrange for consultations about résumé review. Programming is a great way to reach out to patrons and to partner with other groups in the community who have shared goals with the library. Perhaps a presentation on child development and bedtime reading cosponsored with a local hospital? Or a workshop on researching summer internships and employers cohosted with the campus career center? This area is so ripe with possibility—that I wish it were my job! Yet programming can be tricky, and not every program is a guaranteed success. Some libraries shy away from what could be a very good opportunity to connect with patrons and community groups because of the planning and creativity required. As reference patterns change, programming is becoming a burgeoning area of user services and can be a great way to connect people to the materials your library has on a particular subject.

Programming: What is RUSA Doing?

Just as programming is suffused through our libraries' activities, a focus on programming is present across RUSA, but there is not a single "home" for it. Some recent and upcoming activities, as well as committees to look for, are the following:

- Financial literacy is a growing area in libraries, and RUSA has a long-time involvement with the FINRA foundation grant and the new IMLS Sparks Grant to develop guidelines and training for librarians to provide financial literacy services in their libraries.
- Creative Aging in America's Libraries is a program from the RSS Section being held at the 2014 ALA Annual Conference in Las Vegas.

Instruction is programming with learning outcomes, particularly learning related to library resources. The line between programming and instruction can be fine and sometimes disappears. Instruction is not just for academic libraries or teaching about technology, although most instruction done by libraries is about how to find and use the resources in the library. What is special about instruction as a user service is that the librarian leading the session needs to know how to teach or how to evaluate if an outside presenter is a good teacher. My ideas for instruction topics come from working with patrons at the reference desk. Like programming, instruction can be highly responsive and customized to the needs of your communities.

Instruction: What is RUSA Doing?

A lot of what can be learned from RUSA webinars and programs may be topics that could be used for instruction topics or to enhance teaching, such as "Data Visualization, New Ways of Understanding," a program at the 2014 ALA Annual Conference from the MARS-Emerging Technologies Section. Instruction comes up a lot of places—two more examples are

- Communication and Teaching at the Point of Need committee in RSS; and
- Information Literacy Guidelines for History Undergraduates (www.ala.org/rusa/sites/ala.org/rusa/files/content/resources/guidelines/information-literacy-guidelines-history-undergrad.pdf).

ACCESS TO INFORMATION: COLLECTIONS AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION

Collections are at the heart of libraries, whether they are physical or electronic, owned or licensed. Survey after survey tells us that collections are what our users think of and value most about libraries. Collections are a core service for libraries. Collections also form a foundation for programming, instruction, and reading-related services. Readers' advisory services connect our readers with the next book. Author talks

and book groups are programming that connect people to each other and to books. The early twenty-first century can be a challenging time to be building a library collection, and RUSA programs and discussions, such as the CODES Conversations, can help to navigate issues of print vs. electronic, e-book platforms and purchasing, genre reading, and effective readers' advisory techniques.

Collections: What is RUSA Doing?

RUSA and the Collection Development Section (CODES) have a raft of awards for books and media. There are also learning opportunities and discussion groups. Look particularly in CODES for committees and discussions in this area. Other activities related to collections include the following:

- The Book and Media Awards ceremony is held at every ALA Midwinter Meeting. Previous award winners are listed on the RUSA website (www.ala.org/rusa/awards).
- Carnegie Awards for Fiction and Nonfiction will have its third year at the ALA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, and the ceremony is a ticketed event that comes with a bag of books, speeches from the nominated authors, and the excitement of the awards being announced.
- Literary Tastes is held every Annual Conference and is a morning with authors and librarians—with free books!
- The Readers' Advisory 101 online course next being offered runs from March 31 to May 18, 2014.

Circulation and interlibrary loan (ILL) are the two services that probably come to mind as user services. Sometimes also called “access services” or “public services,” these are the typical mainstays for libraries that have a user services department. Circulation is evolving, with many of its traditional functions being technologically mediated. Staff may then be repurposed to other user services in the library. Librarians still provide the management of these services and supervision of access services staff who are often the frontline of customer service in our libraries. With the importance of books to our users, the decline in library purchasing power, space constraints, and the strength of library networks, ILL is an important user service, even if the patron does not interact directly with ILL staff.

ILL and Access Services: What is RUSA Doing?

STARS (Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section) is the newest section in RUSA and provides the following services:

- Interlibrary Loan Code for the United States (www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/interlibrary) as well as other resource-sharing guidelines
- Interlibrary Loan 101—a four-week online course next offered April 7—May 2, 2014 (www.ala.org/rusa/development/interlibraryloan)

Community information and partnerships pop up in many places in the library—if we invite them in. Reference services come to mind, of course, with providing information at the point of need. In the broader realm of user services, libraries help with Medicare, the Affordable Care Act, and other government services by providing programming or a space for government and community agencies to meet with patrons. Help for job seekers is a well-developed service in some libraries and one that is in demand. Even college libraries partner with their community partners for things like career planning and therapy dogs during finals week. The librarian does not always have to be the expert—sometimes the librarian just facilitates the space for another expert to come in and connect with patrons. Adult literacy and ESL are two other areas that naturally bring together a community service with patrons and reading materials. Community partnerships center the library as a place to learn and grow at all ages of life.

Community Information and Partnerships: What is RUSA Doing?

Here are a couple of upcoming programs on community partnership. The Reference Services Section is offering both of these, but the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) and the History Section (HS) are also good places to find other librarians with these interests.

- Your Experiences with the Affordable Care Act: a discussion forum at Annual Conference in Las Vegas
- Partnerships and Job and Career Reference: RSS Job and Career Reference Committee Discussion Forum in Las Vegas
- Guidelines for Establishing Local History Collections (www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesestablishing)

USER-SERVICES: USER-FOCUSED AND USER-EXPERIENCE (UX)

It is a heartening trend in libraries to look at everything with a user-focus, from space, to technology, to collections. RUSA is about the user, the librarian, and the information as a uniting trilogy in user services. User services typically has the librarian in direct contact with the patron (programming, readers' advisory, instruction), but sometimes the librarian is a step removed, providing the service but not seen by the user (collection development, ILL). RUSA has many members who are “accidental technologists” or have responsibilities that are both frontline (working with users) and back-office (working with technology or collections). These are great pairings that keep our jobs interesting and enable us to use what we experience working with patrons to inform and improve our services. The MARS-Emerging Technologies Section has been serving librarians who are at the intersections of user services and technology for more than thirty years. As technology

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becomes more ubiquitous in our work lives, technology is also addressed across RUSA, as well as within the particular emerging focus of MARS-ETS. User Experience (UX) is a relatively new area in libraries as librarians realize the great extent to which our online presence is a library branch and that the paths users take to information can be positive or frustrating. An upcoming webinar to help librarians improve online user services is *How to Conduct Usability Studies: A Librarian Primer* (www.ala.org/rusa/how-conduct-usability-studies-librarian-primer) on April 9, 2014.

CONCLUSION

User services is a broad area in our libraries that provides diverse benefits to our communities. As access to information, patron behaviors, and libraries have changed, user services has become more prominent. It is time for libraries to consider user services not as a little sibling to reference, but as a set of activities as fully deserving of attention, assessment,

administration, staffing, and training as the mainstay of reference service. As evidenced by the *US* in RUSA, our professional organization has a long-standing commitment to supporting librarians and staff that innovate with and improve user services by providing training, guidelines, and networking with others interested in user services. I have not been able to name here all of the aspects of user services in libraries, or even all of the RUSA activities around user services. I hope that this overview has convinced you, if you weren't before, of the vitality and importance of user services and made you aware that RUSA is about more than reference.

References

1. Samuel Swett Green, "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers," *Library Journal* 1 (October 1876): 74–81.
2. For three definitions of "reference" (including RUSA's definition) see Reference and User Services Association, "Definitions of Reference," American Library Association, accessed December 14, 2013, www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/definitionsreference.