
Readers' Services

One is the Loneliest Number

Laurel Tarulli

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When we talk of readers' advisory services in libraries, we often we talk in terms of departments and teams. Those of us who work in public libraries are fortunate to have colleagues with us at the desk or just around the corner in the workroom with whom we can consult on challenging readers' advisory (RA) questions. But as column editor Laurel Tarulli points out, librarians in small libraries or in schools often are operating completely on their own, which can present a challenge in terms of RA work.—*Barry Trott, RUSQ editor*

Running your own fiefdom can be fun and empowering. You rarely if ever have to consult with anyone, you are often left to explore your own creativity and imagination, and you have only yourself to blame if something goes wrong . . . wait. What?

Okay, maybe it's not that bad, but when you are the only librarian managing a small or rural public library, or a media specialist/librarian in a school setting, it often feels as if we are running our own little fiefdoms. We alone forge the path and lead our libraries in the direction we envision, fully empowered as the ultimate decision maker, but also the isolated figure without the day-to-day support many others enjoy. And, ultimately, the bearer of responsibility to insure we have, or can continue to strive for, the knowledge and expertise to support the services needed and expected by our patrons, users, or students.

As the library and information manager for an independent school, I am the lone wolf. Coming from a public library background that offers a wealth of opportunities and support, particularly in readers' services, this has been an adjustment. No longer do I have more than fourteen other librarians to support me, in addition to a wealth of library assistants and resources, as well as yearly, if not quarterly, readers' advisory training. The funds and opportunities to attend conferences are also limited. Even if the funds are available, as the only librarian in a small library, public or school, our constant presence is necessary. Many of these libraries rely heavily, if not entirely, on community volunteers. The librarian is responsible for programming, personally running the programs, curriculum support, readers' services, reference, collection development, circulation, and planning for the physical space. Some of our colleagues may even have to do their own shelving and book processing. How, then, is this entire process managed and managed well? To a new professional, facing these challenges is daunting and seemingly impossible. Even some of us who are more seasoned have days when we want to yank out our hair (if we have any

left!) and worry that we aren't at the forefront of our field; offering our users the best services possible. However, even in these moments of doubt and (utter) panic, there are few key takeaways that all of us should take to heart:

1. We have a library, and we are appreciated.
2. We have a community of professionals who go to great lengths to support us.
3. We love what we do, and that passion always shines through—in our work, to our board or administration and, most important, to our community of users.

Many of us who are making these libraries into a safe-haven and success, even an imperfect success, have a long list of lessons we've learned, grand failures that have taught us a tremendous amount along the way, and colleagues and mentors that extend well beyond the physical walls of our libraries. And this is what we need to focus on, particularly in readers' services.

Easier said than done. In 2006, *College and Research Libraries News* issued a report that indicated "overall workload was the highest-ranking stressor for the 629 academic, public, and school librarians who responded."¹ While not necessarily a surprise, we can all use strategies to cope with the workload.

MINDFULNESS HAS IMPROVED READERS' SERVICES

There are days at the library when I feel like a chicken with its head cut off. I'm frantic, worrying about the reading lists that didn't get done, the new series that I forgot the name of but *think* I can remember one word of the title, and the long list of recommendations I was supposed to gather for a specific reading level and topic. While friends fondly call it my hummingbird mode, they are being kind! I don't think I'm alone, and if you're chuckling to yourself right now, you know you're guilty!

In June, *American Libraries* published the article by Ellyn Ruhlmann titled "Mindful Librarianship."² Mindfulness is a movement or idea that has been gaining popularity for the past couple of years. As this practice makes its way into personal lives and professional environments, the medical field has begun supporting mindfulness, and there are a growing number of publications on how to implement it in our daily lives as well as numerous workshops offered throughout communities. Mindfulness is defined as "the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us."³ Linking mindfulness to librarianship and libraries was eye-opening. It feels like a natural fit. While unspoken, our libraries have attempted to become mindful places for years. Well, mindful havens for our users. But what was memorable about this article was the focus

on mindfulness for librarians. Ruhlmann, the author, states that she "rel[ies] on mindfulness practice to stay focused and calm throughout her workday."⁴

In early 2017, I started slowing down and implementing mindful practices into my work. At first, it was difficult. In some ways, it felt as if less was being achieved and everything took longer to accomplish. However, an odd thing happened. I had more time to think about books. Yes, really. I was reading reviews that I had set aside weeks before, taking note of popular published reading lists, and having reading conversations with colleagues over my listservs and with the community I support. While my reading lists were shorter, they were better. What made them better? I knew what my students were reading, and I had taken the time to find related and lesser known titles. Rather than compiling just a popular list of books, I became better informed about what my community was reading, providing reading lists that catered to appeals and genres, not just name recognition. These reading lists then sparked conversations. I felt more informed than I had in years and could comfortably talk about why I had chosen lesser known titles or new titles and how they related to the personal reading tastes of my students.

More students began stopping at my desk to talk about the books they were reading, often giving me reviews and recommendations as to who should read the book, why, and what to read next. Whereas in the past I felt I didn't have the time to have these long conversations, these conversations became the building blocks of a new user-centred library that changed the entire feeling of the space and my relationship with the students—including trusting my recommendations and a lack of hesitation in approaching me with suggestions or honest feedback of titles I'd suggested.

As with so many aspects of our profession, the personal touch and emphasis on people, rather than "how many, how much" is what continues to make us valuable and trusted. My knowledge of books in genres that I previously avoided or felt insecure about began to flourish and, with that newfound sense of confidence, I initiated conversations with local, small bookstores—in particular, a small children's bookstore up the street which also happens to be the oldest in Canada. Book conversations now abound, and while I don't have the opportunity or time to take advantage of "workshops," I'm practicing readers' services and taking advantage of professional growth opportunities wherever they are presented. I'm learning in the trenches, making mistakes and putting theory and ideas into practical practice. But rather than rushing through these conversations or reviews, I am present and feel like I'm fully participating in them. I don't think this is particular to me. Many of us make do with a hodgepodge of techniques and opportunities to sharpen our readers' services skills and grow our book knowledge. Modestly, most of us don't talk about it or how well we cope when we aren't fortunate enough to have some of the opportunities available at larger libraries.

As my knowledge and familiarity of reading choices and preferences grows, so does my ability to more easily make purchasing choices for the library. Apart from the budget that must be set aside for curriculum and project support, the funds allotted for pleasure reading are being spent more wisely. And, they are informed choices. Rather than purchasing a series solely on the basis of reviews, the purchases are based on the library literature and discussions happening within the school. Rather than boasting that the library has the latest releases, I can now boast that book displays quickly disappear as students eagerly check out what's being featured: new and old. Why? Because I know what our community is reading or what their interests are. And, as expected, the growing strength in readers' services began informing weeding decisions, to the benefit of all.

Another significant benefit of focussing on readers' services was the increase in circulation. In one year, our circulation increased by 500 percent. Yes, 500 percent!

We all have varied pasts and professional experiences. My knowledge and skills are based on a background steeped in readers' services, cataloguing and academics. I fall back on this foundation all the time, always grateful that in the beginning, I had opportunities to attend training sessions and workshops that built readers' services skills. But that doesn't mean that professionals who start off in small libraries can't build and excel at readers' services, and reap the benefits.

Practicing mindful librarianship isn't like a magic wand that I waved which turned me into a readers' services guru. In reality, I think it just allowed me to recognize that as the only librarian, I felt overwhelmed and wasn't practicing wisely. I was reacting, rather than acting to my situation. Struggles abound, especially as the only school librarian serving roughly five hundred students. However, slowing down let me take a moment to recognize my strengths and weakness, my knowledge gaps and surprisingly strong knowledge of genre areas that I felt uncomfortable with in the past. I also allowed myself to have longer conversations with the users of the library, colleagues from other libraries, and read the literature available to me across the internet, listservs and professional journals.

READERS' SERVICES IS OUR BIGGEST ALLY— LESSONS LEARNED

You are more connected than you realize. As the lone wolf navigating through an isolated library world, it's important to recognize that it's a choice to be alone. We are a giving and close group of professionals. In my fourteen years as a librarian in Canada, I have friends that span the globe. These are friends and colleagues that I've met through conferences, electronic discussion lists, and within the community. Although I am alone in the library, with no library assistants or technicians, I am frequently connecting with colleagues

in similar situations and sharing resources. This leads to the next point.

Network, virtually and physically. When I first started as a school librarian, I felt as if I was working in a silo. An island in the middle of the school, I thought my RA opportunities were over, until I realized that a significant amount of my day actually relies on my readers' services skills to boost circulation, inform collection development, and connect with the students. When I couldn't find workshops that fit my work scenario, I branched out and found out that there was a wealth of opportunities and conversations waiting to happen—just not locally. My nearest support network is three provinces away, with the rest residing in the United States. But in some ways, being proactive has given me more resources to rely on because I can't expect a workshop opportunity to be offered every year. The geographic spread has also informed my practices in different ways, as my colleagues are from different regions, with different community needs and practices. My tool box is much fuller now that I recognize these opportunities!

Trust your knowledge. You are an information seeker. Trusting yourself is not easy, especially if you're new to the profession. Our schools do a good job giving us the introductory tools and foundation necessary to be librarians. While we don't have manuals, we have a love of reading. We also know where to look to find what we need—not just for others, but for ourselves. Use your skills to take a moment to find out what's happening in readers' services. What were the latest conference sessions at the ALA Annual Conference and the Public Library Association's conference? Who were the presenters? Can you reach out to them? What are the buzz words and latest reading trends we're chatting about online?

Talk to your community of users. This is your greatest ally when it comes to practicing readers' advisory services—relationships with your community. Take the time to get to know their reading preferences, or lack thereof. For example, I have a student who openly admitted she never found a book that's caught her interest. She's seventeen and a chemistry whiz. Last week, she admitted that she wants to start learning how to cook. I mentioned to her that there are a lot of cookbooks that read almost like chemistry books. They discuss how spices and flavors interact, often addressing it more like formulas and experiments. Her eyes lit up, almost as if it never occurred to her that she could read about cooking as if it were a type of science. Is it pleasure reading? To her, yes, it is. To me, that's a success that would never have been achieved had I not known her interest in chemistry and gained her trust through conversations about her studies at school.

Slow down. It's so simple to say, "slow down." It is so hard to do it. We all know the benefits of being present. There is nothing new that I have written about today. Many of you face greater challenges daily, and some of you likely feel incredibly alone or isolated. Working in a small library, whether it is a public library or school library, is not easy.

READERS' ADVISORY

We don't do it because it's easy. But, in some ways, we are lucky because we can develop relationships with so many of our community members. When that trust builds and we talk about books, it informs everything we do. When reading book reviews, a specific conversation or user's face will pop into our head. Or, when reviewing the slides from a presentation, we'll recall a difficult conversation that might have taken place that these slides address. Every day is an opportunity to build and enhance our readers' services skills. Take them, appreciate them, and trust that your dedication shines through every day.

References

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3. "Mindfulness," Mindful.org, accessed September 16, 2017, <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>.
4. Ruhlmann, "Mindful Librarianship."