The Practice of Collection Development

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Collection evaulation is at the very core of collection development, since it is the means by which the quality of a collection is judged and the outcome of selection decisions measured. We most commonly think of it in terms of a well planned assessment of a carefully delineated part of the collection or as a study of collection use by some segment of the library's clientele. Ideally, these are based on tested techniques; sufficient time and resources are allotted for their completion; and they result in a formal report. However, in addition to major formal assessments, all collection development librarians find themselves making quick summary judgments on the nature of collections and client requirements in the course of their daily work. This type of *ad hoc* assessment deserves, but often does not receive, as much attention as the more impressive variety.

Obviously, solid collection evaluation of whatever sort cannot be carried out without background knowledge and adequate preparation. The literature of collection assessment, its theory and practice is a large one, and the well-informed collection development librarian will be familiar with it. Blaine Hall's *Collection Assessment Manual for College and University Libraries*[1] gives very practical directions for the conduct of both collection and client-centered assessments, including methodology, statistical techniques and reporting formats. The first three chapters of F.W. Lancaster's *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library*[2] contain well documented descriptions of the theoretical underpinnings of various types of assessments. References in Lancaster furnish a guide to additional studies and reports of assessments that explore relationships between size, use, course offerings, citations, age, language, etc. of collections in ways that stimulate fruitful speculation on the part of collection development librarians. Paul Mosher's chapter in *Advances in Librarianship, 1984*, "Quality and Library Collections: New Directions in Research and Practice in Collection Evaulation,"[3] is a comprehensive introduction to the field. *Library Trends* featured Collection Evaluation in its Winter 1985 issue and numerous articles describing and analyzing various methodologies appear regularly in library

literature. Recent analyses of the research methodologies and use of information sources by scholars in various disciplines, although not dealing directly with evaluation, can help form the criteria by which we judge collections. The surveys of information needs in the humanities and social sciences issued by the Research Libraries Group[5] and *Object Image Inquiry: the Art Historian at Work*[6] are examples of such studies.

Familiarity with the literature of collection evaluation may ultimately bear fruit not just in the replication of studies or the mounting of publishable assessments, but also in the daily practice of collection development in our libraries. We can also glean valuable insights from treatments of professional practice in general. Donald Schön, in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, explores the nature of professional practice in a way that has considerable relevance for librarians examining collection evaluation. He defines professional knowledge as a kind of reflection-in-action, in which the practitioner in dealing with many situations "develops a repertoire of expectations, images and techniques. He learns what to look for and how to respond to what he finds."[7] Much of this necessarily implies evaluation. "In his day-to-day practice he makes innumerable judgments of quality . . . Even when he makes conscious use of research-based theories and techniques, he is dependent on tacit recognitions, judgments, and skillful performances."[8]

Schön's point is demonstrated by the collection development librarian deciding on an approval plan, selecting $5000 worth of anthropology titles annually, recommending cancellation of a paper index when a CD-ROM is acquired, choosing to accept or reject a gift collection, or deciding whether a brittle title is worth microfilming. She *may* be able to draw on a full scale analysis of a subject collection conducted recently, or on a campus wide survey of library needs. But, as we all know, this kind of systematically acquired data, directly applicable to the problem, is frequently lacking even in libraries with active collection assessment programs. The soundness of routine collection development decisions depends primarily upon a well-grounded sense of the collection as it exists, and of what it ought to become. We must therefore utilize a form of evaluation that is not totally dependent on the major assessment, carefully planned and statistically significant. As Blaise Cronin has said of performance measures in information management: "Evaluation is as much a way of looking at things as a body of techniques and tools."[9] That is a point we librarians should take to heart. We need new ways of looking at the problem that will stimulate greater "reflection-in-[the] practice" of collection development.

Such new perspectives may be suggested by the work of those concerned with others forms of evaluation. There is, in fact, a field of learning called Evaluation. It developed as a result of the requirement that Federally funded service and educational programs be evaluated for effectiveness. Evaluation now has its own associations, journals, and graduate programs and has generated a literature which examines evaluation both as a science and as an art. This whole literature has something to say to us in the library profession, but one book, *Metaphors for Evaluation*, edited by Nick Smith[10] is particularly useful in suggesting new ways

to visualize the building of collections. Smith's volume applies models and techniques from a variety of disciplines (law, architecture, geography, philosophy, literary and film criticism, etc.) to evaluation methods. For instance, from philosophy comes the practice of concept analysis which can profitably be applied to evaulation, including collection evaluation. The point here is that all evaluation begins with questions. For libraries they may be comprehensive questions that probe the quantity and quality of an entire collection, or they may focus on the appropriateness of a single book for that collection. How good is our women's studies collection? Is a sufficient amount of the budget being spent on preservation? Are the information needs of the Chinese students being met? Embedded in these questions and in the assumptions we make in reaching conclusions are our understandings of the concepts "women's studies collection," "preservation," "information." Becoming more self-conscious about our definition of these concepts can help us to answer the more particularized questions more precisely. This applies to both factual questions (how large is our women's studies collection, how much is being spent on preservation) and those that evaluate "goodness," "sufficiency," or "need." In other words, we must know whether "women's studies collection" means all books about women, feminist studies only, or just those items bought with the Women's Studies Program budget, before we can measure either its size or its quality, to say nothing of deciding its future. The truly professional collection development librarian not only knows this in a theoretical way, but also applies the knowledge in actual decision making.

Another sort of "metaphor" (as Smith calls them) which may enrich our thinking about the quality of a collection is drawn from the field of architecture. Just as the architect must examine the context of a building project, find out what the client wants, and what constraints are built into the situation, collection development librarians must confront the desires of the community they serve and the limitations of resources. We can even take the analogy a step further and think of a collection development plan as an edifice, a "structure" in which available resources are dispersed in a variety of ways, "designed" to serve user needs. If we have carefully investigated the needs of the chemistry faculty, for instance, might we not offer them a combination of locally housed books and journals, on-line searching, current awareness services, document delivery, faxed copies and interlibrary loan as an "information edifice" within which they can live comfortably? Building such an edifice will require sophisticated evaluation skills, innovative and perhaps even "elegant" solutions.

Such new ways of thinking about collections should be part of the evaluation style which the good collection development librarian brings to bear on the daily practice of collection development. This evaluation often takes place in less than ideal circumstances and on the basis of less than full information. I am always somewhat shaken, for example, when I read, as in Hall's manual: "Assessments must be based on a current, clearly stated collection development policy statement for the collection being assessed."[11] Despite the regular evaluation activity going on at my own library, such statements are

still in the process of formulation. For many of us, policy formation and assessment proceed together as part of the"reflection-in-action" that characterizes our practice. In place of a carefully articulated policy, we often must draw on our knowledge of how things work or don't work for users of the library.

For instance, in the mid-1970's we became aware through formal complaints, comments at meetings and casual conversations with our users that they were discouraged by not finding in our library recent monographs that had been reviewed or cited. We also knew that the method of ordering in some disciplines was most unsystematic. To test our assumptions of inadequacy, we checked the *Choice* list of Outstanding Academic Books of 1977, and found that our library had only about 50%. Other testings were no more encouraging, which demonstrated the fact that we had no real collection development program. We had been relying on the sporadic and sometimes idiosyncratic attention of a few members of the faculty, and more recently on the efforts of overworked and often inexperienced library selectors. This assessment was one of the tools we used to convince the faculty that an approval plan would create a more useful collection.

When financial support is very limited, an approval plan must work well. We continued to track our holdings of the annual Outstanding Academic Book List and found that, after three years of the approval plan, we had 85% of the titles on the first search. In addition, small but regular and varied assessments helped us to verify the plan's effectiveness. For example, we reassured the International Studies bibliographer that the approval plan was working by checking both *Foreign*

Affairs and a bibliography from a recent monograph which he suggested. A review of materials needed to support a new program in gerontology led us to adjust our approval profile to include certain types of medical and social work titles which we did not normally collect. Unexciting and routine? Yes, but also illustrative of the way collection evaluation actually works in academic library collection development.

The collection development practitioner must be alert to whether things are going well, must consider the policies and procedures that have produced the current situation and formulate a hypothesis which can be tested. With some (rarely conclusive) evidence, action is taken, followed by more observation and further testing. The insights that the collection development librarian brings to this process, as well as the quality of her information, will affect the results. The case described above had a successful outcome, but the process that produced it should be on-going. What do we hear from our users now? What in the evironment has changed since 1977? Is it time for a new hypothesis? And what new ideas can we bring to its formulation?

As Smith writes in *Metaphors for Evaluation*, "The practice of evaluation incorporates elements of inquiry, valuing and. . .change. . ."[12] How well it is done depends on the knowledge and experience of the practitioner. Schön points out, however, that the word practice not only refers to "performance in a range of professional situations", but may also refer to "preparation for performance."[13] Collection assessment can play a vital part in the formation of collection development librarians. It can not only

acquaint them with their own collection, but can also introduce them to the national standards by which a collection is judged outstanding.

With the growing participation of libraries in the North American Collections Inventory Project (NCIP), applying standardized criteria to judging collections has become increasingly important. It is an ability that must be learned. Collection assessments or verification studies developed in conjunction with NCIP, based as they are on national research collections, may raise doubts about evaluations based on local standards. Our Literature Bibliographer was very new when she had to rate our collections for the NCIP conspectus, and her earlier experience in smaller libraries had led her to rank those collections at an unjustifiably high level. Carrying out a national verfication study based on a sample of sections from the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* and the *MLA Annual Bibliography* soon made her realize that our holdings, ranging from 34% to 75% made us somewhat less of a research library than the consistent percentages in the 80s and 90s range of the several large research libraries whose holdings were reported. The shock our Bibliographer received was a salutary one. It stimulated her ambition and gave her something to strive for and in time she came to realize that these validation studies can provide only a glimpse of a library's collection. Having strengthened her inquiry skills, she began to raise questions of value, e.g., to what extent and in what areas *should* our collections resemble those of the Harvards and Yales? She began to examine those segments of our collection on whose research quality we prided our-

self — for instance, our Dante collection. It was good, she discovered, but a study of the results of the bibliographic checks she did made her realize that we were falling behind in the acquisition of secondary works. Then the third element of evaluation came into play, namely, change. We have been working to remedy this weakness in the Dante collection ever since.

The skillful practice of collection evaluation may lead to imaginatively designed and statistically sophisticated studies of the collections and their use, and we do need these. Much more frequently, however, assessment will be occasioned by a pressing circumstance to which the collection development librarian must respond. For instance, a few years ago a faculty member told us about a collection of Africana for immediate sale, for which there was no list of contents available. It had been built over the years by a scholarly clergyman, contained general English language material published from the 19th century through the 1950s and 1960s, and was particularly strong in South African materials. Two obvious questions presented themselves: the extent of our interest in South African studies and the extent to which the collection duplicated our current holdings. Through conversation with the faculty member and a brief review of course information, we concluded that there was a real, but limited research and curriculum interest in African studies. Learning something about the donor and how the collection had been built helped answer the second question. We reviewed our shelf list which showed a greater strength in South Africa than elsewhere; we checked some Area Handbooks for African countries which indicated that we owned

80% of the titles listed and were particularly good for the 1950s and 1960s when much of this collection was acquired by its owner. Many of the 19th century works in the collection were on exploration and settlement in South Africa. A check of relevant subject headings showed a surprisingly high incidence of similar 19th century imprints in our own collection. The collection for sale also had many works on the missions, not something we buy much on currently; in addition we had just been given an African collection by a Catholic missionary organization. We did not buy the collection, a decision that emerged from a typical bit of *ad hoc* collection assessment.

In another instance, the Advisory Council of our Latin American Institute wanted a description of library support for Latin American studies so it could formulate recommendations to the University administration. The request occasioned an assessment that highlighted particularly telling points, including a comparison of our acquisitions and expenditures with the annual output of relevant publications, and with expenditures at other libraries. The outcome was many thousands of additional dollars for Latin American materials and the hiring of a bibliographer. Similar occasions occur regularly. The University Development Office often asks for descriptions of the state of a subject collection to make a case carefully designed to move a potential donor. Each of these situations requires a quick diagnosis of what is needed and a choice from among the range of assessment options that is both intelligent and pragmatic; in fact, the very essence of good practice.

A fresh understanding of what collection evaluation means in the working environment of collection development is needed. To achieve this a recognition of its place in much of what we do is essential. Ideas and examples, new terminologies and different questions may be additional steps toward that end. To go back to philosophy, conceptual analysis might begin with the word "collection." Slipping into the architecture metaphor, is it still the roomful of carefully chosen, well-marked books and journals, or are our clients finding this structure cramped and inconvenient? Are we talking to them about their dream library and investigating new building materials? The applications of collection evaluation are limited only by the imagination and skills of collection developers.

Notes

1. Blaine H. Hall, *Collection Assessment Manual for College and University Libraries* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1985).

2. F.W. Lancaster, *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1988).

3. Paul Mosher, "Quality and Library Collections: New Directions in Research and Practice in Collection Evaluation," in *Advances in Librarianship*, V. 13 (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

4. Elizabeth Futas and Sheila S. Intner, issue editors, "Collection Evaluation," *Library Trends* 22 (Winter, 1985).

5. *Information Needs in the Humanities: an Assessment* (Stanford, CA: Research Libraries Group, 1988). *Information Needs in the Social Sciences: an Assessment* (Stanford, CA: Research Libraries Group, 1989).

6. *Object Image Inquiry: the Art Historian at Work* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Art History Information Program, 1988).

7. Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 60.

8. *Ibid.*, 50.

9. Blaise Cronin, "Performance Measure and Information Management," *ASLIB Proceedings* 34 (May 1982): 231.

10. Smith, Nick L. ed., *Metaphors for Evaluation: Sources of New Methods* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981).

11. Hall, 1.

12. Smith, 30.

13. Schön, 60.