

# **AC 2009-630: READERS' ADVISORY IN THE ENGINEERING LIBRARY**

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# Readers' Advisory in the Engineering Library

## Abstract

Traditionally, librarians view readers' advisory (RA) as a public library function, geared toward recommending fiction and focused around genre studies. This paper argues that an active RA program would provide engineering librarians with a tool to help students broaden their scientific, technical, and social perspectives beyond their course and project work. Many colleges and universities require student cohorts to participate in campus reading programs; RA in the engineering library would go beyond these community reads to promote directed casual reading across disciplines. The many techniques explored by public library RA librarians can be effectively translated for use in a nonfiction, technical literature environment. For example, at Linda Hall Library, we have adapted RA techniques and used them for selection of works for our Periodic Roundtable book discussions. In engineering, practitioners implement technologies with intention and consequence to human society. For this reason, we should programmatically encourage casual reading in addition to academic reading as part of the educational process for engineers.

## Readers' Advisory: Background

Readers' Advisory (RA) encompasses a range of librarian activities with the goal of encouraging library users to become active recreational readers. Bill Crowley, in his essay "A History of Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library," states that RA

"...is best understood as an organized program promoting both fiction and non-fiction discretionary reading for the dual purposes of satisfying reader needs and advancing a culture's goal of a literate population."<sup>1</sup>

RA can involve both indirect promotion, such as the creation of book displays in the library and booklists using web tools such as GoodReads, and direct interaction with the library users to help them find a suitable book or article. The key factor that distinguishes RA from other reference transactions in the academic environment appears to be the intended use of the materials the users seek to access. For reference purposes, the user wants to satisfy some scholarly or imperative information need, the implication being that satisfaction of this need nets the user some gain in knowledge. RA, on the other hand, does not have an immediately recognizable gaining principle; the user seeks materials for personal entertainment.

Interest and enthusiasm for RA has waxed and waned over much of the 20th Century. While in the United States public librarian interest in finding appropriate leisure reading materials for patrons dates to the nineteenth century, the beginnings of a readers' advisory movement can be traced to a 1920's American Library Association program titled "Reading with a Purpose." This program produced a series of bibliographic essays that each provided an introduction to a topic, followed by recommendations of eight to twelve books to read, sometimes in an intended reading order.<sup>2</sup> Over time, conceptions of RA changed from the

librarian as authority or arbiter of “proper” reading material for the user, to a view that RA provided a consultative function to assist users in discovering a range of choices of reading materials, with the ultimate selection being the user’s alone.

In recent years, spurred in part by multiple editions of Joyce Saricks's *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, RA has enjoyed a modest Renaissance in the library professional literature. This research has included studies that pushed RA beyond genre studies of fictional styles, and discussed frameworks for discussing and recommending non-fiction and cross-genre works based upon appeal factors.<sup>3</sup>

This paper proposes that academic engineering librarians should create active RA programs at their institutions, specifically to promote broader scientific literacy and enhance critical thinking skills. The benefits of extracurricular reading as part of the educational process are discussed, with special consideration given to the development of engineering professionals. Also, the barriers to implementation and success of an RA program are examined. Finally, the paper presents some thoughts on the promotion of recreational reading in the sciences.

### **Why Readers' Advisory?**

Some will certainly question what place RA has in an academic institution, particularly in a specialized library whose mission is to support ambitious curricular goals. However, if we dismiss RA as a public library activity geared toward mere entertainment, a program that engineering libraries cannot afford to provide, we miss an opportunity to engage our academic community and further the societal goals of education. We may also do a disservice to our students as they prepare for a competitive job-seeking environment after graduation.

Recreational reading has been shown to improve writing and hone critical thinking skills. Barbara MacAdam offers some insight into why this is so. She points out that stories create structures for developing context and organizing seemingly disparate information. “Finally, we get a glimpse of one apparently unique possibility why reading and writing are such powerful factors or tools in critical reasoning. That power is the ability of narrative structure – stories – to construct unifying conceptual frameworks that organize concepts into a coherent whole.” This MacAdam expands upon:

“Narration appeals to our power to understand movement and growth and has a natural ability to attract and structure data. Further, it energizes the reader at the same time that it provides a logical organization to the domain where every new detail that it incorporates has an impact and effect upon every other element – every detail counts and adds to the quality of the whole.”<sup>4</sup>

Our knowledge of the folklore of pre-literate societies and the survival of the great epics of Homer (among many other sagas) demonstrate the ability of people to remember and convey considerable informational detail through stories. If narrative can serve such a powerful integrative function in human learning and development, shouldn't engineering libraries explore programs that assist our users in finding stories that can help them contextualize their knowledge?

We can look to studies examining groups of leisure readers to understand what kind of educational value there might be in promotion of an RA program. Interestingly, adult patrons at public libraries found the leisure reading of fiction to be highly educational. Jessica Moyer's survey found that 71% of respondents (n=62) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "Fiction reading helps me understand my world," while 87% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "Reading fiction has little educational value." Based upon the complete results of her survey, Moyer concluded that the educational outcomes for these readers could be classified in four categories: heightened understanding of people and relationships; new knowledge of other countries, cultures, and historical periods; the sparking of imagination, creativity, or a "livelier mind;" and learning about different perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

These outcomes correlate well with some desirable mental attributes for engineers. Because the engineering fields bring scientific and technical skills to bear in the provision of products and services, engineers who have a broad understanding of social diversity and how people collectively and individually interact with technology can better anticipate and address the problems of society. Engineers operate in a global environment, where knowledge and sensitivity to local or indigenous cultures can prove crucial in furthering their work. Also, engineers are called upon to show creativity and be innovative in response to the problems of the built environment. As Patricia Galloway notes in her book *The 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Engineer*, "The needs [of developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations] are quite different, and the engineer must understand those differences and how best to address them when planning infrastructure projects that adhere to the principles of sustainable design."<sup>6</sup> If engineering libraries can encourage and motivate students to engage in extracurricular reading for enjoyment, could this RA activity not have a similar desirable educational impact in the lives of future engineering professionals to what Moyer found for adult leisure readers?

Today, as graduates of our institutions enter their fields, they are encountering one of the most competitive job markets in a generation. Employers don't just want newly-minted graduates from institutions with a well-recognized, specialized, professional curriculum. The companies hiring engineers look increasingly for job-seekers with more experience and abilities, people who will have skills in critical thinking and the desire to learn and grow throughout their professional lives. With the half-life of the technical knowledge gained in some engineering fields in the neighborhood of a few years, it is in society's best interest that our graduates be flexible, adaptable, and life-long learners.<sup>7</sup>

Engineering schools, in response to the needs of industry, have implemented cooperative educational programs and an increased emphasis on team projects to provide students with more experiences similar to those of working professionals prior to graduation. In order to assist our students in becoming better life-long learners, engineering libraries can implement RA programs and encourage leisure reading of narrative nonfiction across the boundaries of the students' technical disciplines.

Chances are high that such an RA program would find general support from within the community. Catherine Sheldrick Ross has explored the motivations of people who read nonfiction for pleasure, and found that they read in order to learn more about their interests and

engagement with the world around them. In the specific case of biographies, the readers showed most enthusiasm for reading narratives related to their interests or their own lives.<sup>8</sup> Thinking about RA within the engineering education community, students would likely find interesting nonfiction narratives about engineering history or biographies of inventors and technologists. Leisure readings in these areas would expose students to stories that allow them to put their abstract classroom learning into broader societal contexts.

### **Barriers to RA in the Engineering Library**

Librarians of any length of service know a familiar litany of justification for why an institution cannot implement a particular library program. The three major “culprits,” as identified by Julie Elliott, are budget constraints, lack of staff time, and lack of adequate space.<sup>9</sup> In historical perspective, however, these cogent and rational justifications have been raised repeatedly in criticism of many innovative approaches in the library community since the 1950's. Should there be agreement as to the need to prioritize a program, however, the same methods to overcome these barriers apply to all library programs: explain and track costs and time, quantify and report value, and demonstrate that the library program will be a net benefit. At the risk of being dismissive, since the triad of cost, time, and space are well understood in the context of earlier library innovations, there is little need to write more about these barriers at this time. If the argument for RA in the engineering library is convincing, these barriers can be overcome.

Elliott discusses another barrier that she classifies as “elitism,” referring to a tendency on the part of (mostly a past generation of) librarians to censor readers by selecting and promoting their idea of the “best” books to read. History has not treated the recorded accounts by some of these librarians kindly, revealing a bias against some great literature by Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald as an example. Elliott believes many academic librarians are unwilling to work with RA because of a desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past.<sup>10</sup>

A more significant barrier may be the professional perception that RA should be a function solely of public libraries, and that the academic library should focus solely on the serious educational mission of the institution. However, in the mid-twentieth century the “browsing room” was a common feature of academic libraries, and reading rooms were devoted to recreational collections. During this period, academic librarians identified advocacy of reading, including recreational reading, as an important component of the library's mission.

As Rochelle Smith and Nancy J. Young note, the decline of browsing rooms and RA in academic libraries in the second half of the twentieth century stems almost exclusively from developments on the library administration/management side of academic libraries, referring again to costs, staff time, and “an increasing emphasis on a type of ‘efficiency’ that considers such services superfluous and not worthy of university funds.”<sup>11</sup> However, this decline had nothing to do with any published study or data showing that students or faculty needed or requested RA any less frequently than in the past.

“Students still ask for fun books and for current novels: they value this service, and in fact new students may expect it based on their prior experiences in public and school libraries. Academic libraries should be fulfilling and building upon those expectations

rather than letting them languish, and losing a crucial opportunity for engagement with the larger community in the process.”<sup>12</sup>

As cited by Smith and Young, in the report “To Read or Not to Read,” the National Education Association made clear that reading should be fostered as much as academic achievement, because reading for pleasure can both support curricular goals and enable students to grow beyond them.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the greatest barrier to RA programs in engineering libraries may be our own attitudes and preconceptions of RA, and our view of the scope and mission of the engineering library itself.

### **Promoting Recreational Reading for Engineering Students**

If the engineering library should develop an RA program, how should librarians implement and promote RA to ensure success? How should success be measured?

Thanks to the work of Joyce Saricks, RA librarians have new frameworks for evaluating reader interests and recommending likely candidates for that next book to read. In Chapter 3 of *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library*, “Articulating a Book’s Appeal,” Saricks identifies four broad categories of appeal factors, narrative characteristics that readers can express opinion about or find favor (or disfavor) with the book. Pacing, the first category, articulates whether a narrative is slow or fast-paced, a thriller or a meditation. Characterization describes the narrative’s development of the protagonists and supporting cast, the amount (or lack) of detail in fleshing out the actors. Story Line deals with plot. Does the narrative follow a narrow line, does the story have a thousand diverging tales, or is the story characterized by practically no story at all? Some readers want the tight suspense and drama of a time-critical project, others might want to read a character study of an engineer. Finally, Frame covers a spectrum of characteristics like setting, background, atmosphere, and tone. A reader may prefer books about Arctic exploration, set in the modern day, with a concern for global climate change’s impact upon the ocean, for example.<sup>14</sup>

Because appeal factors can describe books without reference to genre, the RA librarian can use appeal (or non-appeal) to recommend a wider spectrum of books to readers. While much of this genre-bending or busting analysis has focused on getting readers to hop around fictional genres, librarians can use the same techniques to help readers find their next book of narrative nonfiction. Abby Alpert, in her article “Incorporating Nonfiction into Readers’ Advisory Services,” draws this connection between appeal factors originally developed for genre fiction and their use to describe narrative nonfiction. Alpert goes on to detail other appeal factors associated with narrative nonfiction, including “...its intellectual content: learning about how an object or discovery shaped human history or the achievement of understanding a complex topic that has been expressed in an accessible and pleasurable fashion.”<sup>15</sup>

Academic librarians have not put a high priority on practicing RA, so it is not surprising that articles about RA in the academy represent a small sliver of the professional literature. Fortunately, thanks to framing of the RA interview in terms of appeal factors, the engineering librarian interested in RA can brush up on these skills by attending any number of courses or workshops aimed at public or school librarians. The skills can develop independently of the

content. Rochelle Smith and Nancy Young also note that web resources like reader blogs enable librarians to learn more about the books people are reading, and that a tremendous opportunity exists to tap into the leisure reading by our faculty and staff to build a collection-specific body of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Alpert mentions many web-based resources, including Book TV ([www.booktv.org](http://www.booktv.org)) and The Readers' Advisor (<http://sachem.suffolk.lib.ny.us/advisor/advisor.htm>) that provide brief reviews and/or suggestions of books that have similar themes or subject matter.<sup>17</sup>

Engineering librarians not prepared to take an activist approach to RA might want to consider allowing RA to develop “organically,” through exposing students and faculty to possible leisure reading materials through book displays in the library and book lists on the library web site.<sup>18</sup> Another low-cost method of promoting RA would be for librarians to create accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and GoodReads for the purpose of promoting leisure reading through the sciences and engineering. The library web site could link to these social site presences.

How can success of an RA program at an engineering library be measured? Probably with difficulty, although certainly circulation statistics can identify whether promoted titles have attracted greater community attention. However, quantifiable metrics are elusive and only tangentially representative. Like many of the outcomes of educational efforts, the true cream off the top defies description. Many writers talk of the individual encounter with the student who finds ineffable joy in reading beyond the curriculum. Smith and Young wax poetic about the benefit of an effective RA program to the librarians involved.

“To be seen not merely as dreary purveyors of complex and daunting databases, as more adults talking at them [students] of onerous tasks they must complete in order not to fail, but as passionate, curious intellects in our own right, proud of our profession and with our own spark of inquisitiveness, of interest on the dizzying variety of fascinations in the world, and as experts on finding out more about whatever catches fire in their imaginations.”<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Readers' Advisory in an engineering library – hopefully, this no longer seems an absurd supposition. Because of the strong links between leisure reading and the educational process, RA provides a welcome addition to the services offered by an academic library in support of the educational mission of the institution. Leisure reading helps the reader to build contextual frameworks that enable better retention of information and integration of ideas into knowledge. Remembering and learning through stories represents an ancient mode of education that pre-dates the written word and appears to be especially fitted to human nature.

Barriers to implementing an RA program include the familiar trio of money, time, and space constraints. If librarians value RA as a priority activity in librarianship and our library's mission, however, these problems can be overcome.

Engineering libraries can implement full-blown RA programs with trained staff and subscription tools, they can promote leisure reading through providing positive exposure to

materials and environmental messages that reinforce the value of non-curricular reading, or they can put in place a program with a degree of effort in between these extremes.

Ultimately, the value of an RA program rests in a library's engagement with its community. RA gives engineering librarians an opportunity to connect and interact with faculty and students in a way that reinforces the value of the library and the librarian in the educational process. While this benefit appears self-serving, the overall impact of RA upon individual readers can be profound, if not readily measurable.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Crowley, Bill. (2004). "A History of Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library." in Burgin, Robert (ed.). *Nonfiction Readers' Advisory*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited. Page 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 15.

<sup>3</sup> See Taylor, Joan Bessman. (2007). "Good for What: Non-appeal, Discussability, and Book Groups (Part 1)." *Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, 46 (4), 33-36.

<sup>4</sup> MacAdam, Barbara. (1995). "Sustaining the Culture of the Book: The Role of Enrichment Reading and Critical Thinking in the Undergraduate Curriculum." *Library Trends*, 44 (2), Fall 1995, 237-263. Page 243.

<sup>5</sup> Moyer, Jessica E. (2007). Learning From Leisure Reading: A Study of Adult Public Library Patrons. *Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, 46 (4), 66-79. Pages 71, 74-75.

<sup>6</sup> Galloway, Patricia D. (2008). *The 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Engineer: A Proposal for Engineering Education Reform*. Reston, VA: ASCE Press. Page 17.

<sup>7</sup> National Academy of Engineering (2005). *Educating the Engineer of 2020: Adapting Engineering Education to the New Century*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Page 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ross, Catherine. (2004). "Reading Nonfiction for Pleasure: What Motivates Readers?" in Burgin, Robert (ed.). *Nonfiction Readers' Advisory*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited. Pages 113, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Elliott, Julie. (2007). "Academic Libraries and Extracurricular Reading Promotion." *Reference User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, 46 (3), 34-43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pages 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, Rochelle, and Nancy J. Young. (2008). "Giving Pleasure its Due: Collection Promotion and Readers' Advisory in Academic Libraries." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34 (6), November 2008, 520-526. Page 521.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pages 521-522.

<sup>13</sup> NEA. (2007). To Read or Not to Read (*Research Report #47*), page 21.

<sup>14</sup> Saricks, Joyce G. and Nancy Brown. (1997). *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chicago: ALA.

<sup>15</sup> Alpert, Abby. (2007). "Incorporating Nonfiction into Readers' Advisory Services." *Reference User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, 46 (1), 25-31. Page 30.

<sup>16</sup> Smith and Young. Page 524.

<sup>17</sup> Alpert. Page 30.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott. Page 40.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and Young. Page 524.