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An Agenda of Praxis for Young Adult Librarianship

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By Anthony Bernier, Associate Professor, San Jose State University

Praxis Is Where I'm Headed

All research seeks to impact the world. Library and Information Science (LIS) desires it no less than the “hard” sciences. So I am gratified to see *JRYL* promoting young adult (YA) research, and appreciate YALSA Research Committee's efforts in articulating a list of research needs. The new [National Research Agenda](#) represents a welcome, if qualified, addition to YALSA's portfolio of service.

I am frequently puzzled by not seeing more consistent connections between research and daily practice. Because beyond the tired clichés about library school being “too theoretical,” there nevertheless exists a need for researchers, and the YA practitioners who influence them, to better link the theoretical/conceptual with daily practice. Theory calls this linkage “praxis.” Continually studying obscure topics does not, in my estimation, help librarians improve service. Nor does it tend to attract new YA library school students to become scholars or even to participate in research. My last research grant required hiring four graduate students not interested in YA work because (after fifty-two interviews) those who are do not qualify for or value contributing to new scholarship. That speaks volumes.

My recent research publications were influenced by work I know librarians do and information they need. Since joining the faculty at San Jose State University, I have surveyed how libraries support YA professionalism. I demonstrated the negative media misrepresentations about youth and assessed their implications for library service. I studied library YA volunteers—a perennial concern for practice—to discover that we have yet to think systematically about this experience and what it holds for young people and their communities. I intended to give beleaguered librarians data and analysis for their advocacy efforts, and to give students a sense of the field's growth and dynamism. I continue to research the still-budding topic of YA space equity. And way back in 2007, I published the lead essay in *Youth Information-Seeking Behavior II* in which I argue not only that LIS had largely ignored YA research but that a forward-looking research agenda should start asking its own questions about young people rather than relying on paradigms emanating from other disciplines.¹

The Research Challenge

A key research challenge remains LIS's allergy to social theory. Predictably, the National Research Agenda avoids social theory. Today, if libraries take YA service data seriously at all, they do so still almost entirely rooted in institutionally-defined output measures: How many YAs came to a program? How many joined the club? At least two consequences for LIS issue from this lack of praxis. The first consequence yields a conceptually banal approach encouraging and reproducing success bias: “Success” occurred simply because something happened.

The same holds true for “best practices.” Mere accomplishment does not necessarily qualify as a model. Simply counting heads or circulation statistics (though useful) is not a persuasive value proposition during the present neo-conservative onslaught on the very notion of public service itself.

Success bias and unsubstantiated best practice claims persist, however, despite our colleague Eliza Dresang's urgings to systematically evaluate by measuring outcomes—things that actually change as a consequence of service interventions—not simply what we report doing.² Granted, we have done a good job of incorporating technology into YA service discourse. But technology offers a delivery system, not a service vision. LIS discourse concentrates chiefly on youth in the life of the library. Thus, we continue on, blind to the more urgent and theoretically challenging questions of praxis about the library's vision and role in the life of youth.³

My 2007 YA information seeking article highlights a second consequence of our LIS allergy to praxis. As apparent in YALSA's new research agenda, as in practically every book, article, essay, conference talk, course syllabus, and in-service training workshops and webinars, LIS remains devoted to the notion of "youth development" □ as a congregation to a liturgy. Space and time do not allow a thorough unpacking of this observation here. But suffice it to say that LIS institutionally participates in what I have coined the "Youth Development-Industrial Complex." □ It has done so without careful study or examination of neither its legacy nor its relationship to our mission. Apparently we simply walked over to the psychology department one day, picked up the youth development paradigm, and stapled it to our curricula, research, and practice.

Critical social theory terms this response "normalization" □—a process by which certain ideas become concretized and exist beyond question, context, or alternative. And we continue to reproduce it not as a particular approach among other possibilities, not noting its historical contexts within youth studies, not even evaluating its all-encompassing and universal conceits about social class, individualism, or racial and gender biases (including reproductive rights).⁴

Psychological insights might well belong in our work. Psychology's influence on the apparatus of youth development certainly helped cohere a degree of YA practice since at least the mid-1980s.⁵ As a discipline, however, psychology has propounded a deficit-driven view of youth since its invention in the late nineteenth century. Youth are constructed as sub-par "others," □ manchurian subjects liable to snap at a moment's notice, and compared only to mythic self-actualized uber-adults who presumably benefitted from all forty so-called "developmental assets." □ This is not a discussion about youth at all; it is a debate about what adults should be. LIS accepted it as gospel.

Furthermore, this deficit legacy purports to hold true for all "youth" □ in all cultures, all nations, and all historical periods. What discipline gets away with arguing that its foundational concepts of universal applicability remain unchanged for over a century? That legacy remains with us today no matter what we call it.⁶ Thus, LIS adopted a definition of its YA users by what they lack. Psychology produces youth as patients and research subjects. Education envisions youth as students and pupils. Criminal justice imagines youth as suspects and perpetrators. Even the Physical Education department envisions youth as athletes. Yet, uninformed by more recent critical social theory, LIS allows others to perform our intellectual labor and define our users. We need our own vision of what libraries should be in the life of YAs, not what needy YAs are in the life of libraries.

A New Trajectory

My most current research, a Federal National Leadership Grant funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), explores praxis through the notion of YA space equity in libraries. This project employs quantitative data gathering methods, innovative approaches in virtual environments, and ethnographic data (narrated video footage) in seeking to establish verifiable best practice.⁷

My future research will continue along the praxis trajectory in pursuing the causes and implications of our LIS allergy to critical social theory. I plan a return to my role as a historian (from my Ph.D. training) and begin a project I feel YA librarianship needs desperately: a history of itself.⁸ Neither researchers, practitioners, nor our LIS students can grasp the changing dynamics of our views of YAs, our profession, or institutional interventions without an identity of who we have been, the roles we played, the challenges we faced, and the meanings YAs have made of it all. Our recently departed Dorothy M. Broderick (1929–2011), for instance, did not argue for YA services in the same way Margaret Alexander Edwards (1902–1988) did before her.⁹ Neither of them advocated entirely in ways we need today. Thus, while YA librarians have always cared about young people, we have done so differently throughout history. These differences come freighted with reasons and implications. Professionals need to know them.

Both of these projects engage critical youth studies and post-modern theory and thus produce more modest truth claims.¹⁰ This is a modesty that hegemonic youth development, and its universal truth claims, lack. We design YA spaces one way when we view youth as “at-risk,” □ for instance, slightly another way when we view them through “youth development,” □ and yet another way if we envision them as citizens. The same maintains for all components in our professional profile. YA service truths percolate up from the local and situated, under particular circumstances, in specific places, and at specific times. Grand truths do not simply flow down wholly conceived from on high.

The confluence of these intellectual paradigms brings LIS to a conceptual, and, yes, a theoretical crossroads. But the crossroads we approach now cannot sustain being ignored, a gentle evolution, or a simple adaptation. What is required now is reimagining the library in today’s diverse and postmodern world. Unlike our research and practice for well over the past quarter century (rooted in privileging collections), today’s LIS challenge is broader and more urgent. YA service must expand beyond current national and historical conceits if we are to thrive professionally. We can’t do that stuck in the nineteenth century. In particular, LIS must drive toward a more LIS-specific vision of young adults, rooted in praxis, while simultaneously facing the existing challenges of content creation, curation, social context, and the meanings that young people can make of libraries and information.

References and Notes

1. Anthony Bernier, “Not Broken by Someone Else’s Schedule: On Joy and Young Adult Information-Seeking,” □ in Mary K. Chelton and Coleen Cool (eds.), *Youth Information-Seeking Behavior: Theories, Models, and Issues* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007, pages xiii-xxvii); the still-seminal assessment of youth services research remains Christine A. Jenkins, “The History of Youth Services Librarianship: A Review of the Research Literature,” □ *Libraries and Culture* 35 (2001): 103-139.
2. Eliza T. Dresang, Melissa Gross, and Leslie Edmonds Hold, *Dynamic Youth Services through Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2006).
3. And thus we continually read about how our putative patrons find our service lacking: Vivian Howard, “What Do Young Teens Think About the Public Library?” □ *Library Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2011): 321-344; Sherry J. Cook, Stephen, Parker, and Charles E. Pettijohn, “The Public Library: An Early Teen’s Perspective,” □ *Public Libraries* 44, no. 3 (2005): 157-161; Heather Fisher, “A Teenage View of the Public Library: What Are the Students Saying?” □ *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 16, no. 1 (2003): 4-16; Linda Hill and Helen Pain, “Young People and Public Libraries: Use, Attitudes, and Reading Habits: A Survey of 13-16 Year-Olds in Nottinghamshire,” □ *International Review of Children’s Literature and Librarianship* 3, no. 1 (1988): 26-40.

4. Here I might recommend several important monographs demonstrating how youth studies is advancing theoretical interventions and leaving LIS research behind: Jessica K. Taft, *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Mary E. Thomas, *Multicultural Girlhood: Racism, Sexuality, and the Conflicted Spaces of American Education* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2011).
5. Julie Spielberger, Carol Horton, and Lisa Michels, *New on the Shelf: Teens in the Library; Summary of Key Findings from the Evaluation of Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development, a Wallace Foundation Initiative* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2004); Virginia Walter, "Public Library Service to Children and Teens: A Research Agenda," *Library Trends* 51 (2003): 571-589.
6. The most recent "positive youth development" is reminiscent of the manufacturing process called "gold plating" in which slight modification of a standardized form is marketed as "new," such as the small body or performance changes made to the latest model car or computer. Further, if we are to accept "positive" youth development now, what have we been practicing for the past quarter century or more? See William Damon, "What is Positive Youth Development?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 591 (2004): 13-24.
7. I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the research team supported by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership grant: Research assistants Antonia Krupicka-Smith, Pam Okosun, Joy Rodriguez, Collin Rickman, Julia Whitehead, and Jonathan Pacheco Bell; and researchers Dr. Mike Males, Dr. Jeremy Kemp, and Dr. Denise Agosto.
8. The first and only attempt at this to date is thirty-three years old: Miriam Braverman, *Youth, Society and the Public Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1979).
9. Broderick is most widely known as cofounder (along with Dr. Mary K. Chelton, Queens College) of the magazine *Voice of Youth Advocates* in 1978.
10. I have just completed editing a collection of essays addressing this very topic with publisher Neal-Schuman that is due out in spring 2012.

Dr. Anthony Bernier served as a professional field practitioner for 18 years (Director of Young Adult Services for Oakland Public Library; 10 years as YA Specialist for L.A. Public Library). He has designed a variety of innovative outreach and programming models, including the original service and space plan for the first purpose-built library YA space: LAPL's acclaimed TeenS'cape. He has received IMLS National Leadership Grants to advance research on developmentally-appropriate YA spaces and he continues to speak on and consult with architects and public agencies on library space design.