by Alvin M. Schrader

From Numbers to Value: Challenges in Telling the Whole Story of Library User Experience

Last May I was honoured to present a session at the 2010 annual conference of the Quebec Library Association about using library statistics effectively, which I framed as "Beyond Statistics to Stories: Turning Features into Benefits by Capturing Library Meaning and Value." The session was well attended, but as it happened the only completed evaluation form not picked up by my session convenor turned out to be less than complimentary, something to the effect of "Nothing I haven't heard before." (Others, however, said they found the themes interesting, and one attendee even Facebooked me a few days later.)

Perhaps the person who made the "nothing new" claim was already familiar with my published articles on the subject.[1] Regardless, the challenge of demonstrating library value has not gone away, and the international financial crisis has made research and innovation all the more urgent in all sectors of the Canadian library community. One hopeful trend is an increasing interest in outputs, outcomes and impacts, but there is still so much we don't know and need to study.

The approach I'm suggesting is to ask what traditional statistics in any given library sector communicate to users, other stakeholders and decision makers. All those vast numbers of statistics about circulation, website visits, in-person counts, reference questions, programs and so on – what do library statistics really mean? Do we need additional metrics to more fully express library value and library effectiveness? These are challenging questions, because they are answered in as many millions of ways as there are library user interactions with services, staff and collections.

Beyond raw numbers

Traditional approaches to measurement of library collections and services emphasize the features and capacities of the library, not its benefits and impacts. This article explores the challenges of getting beyond raw numbers to capturing and articulating the full meaning of every library use.

Basic to these challenges is a shift in thinking about measurement and evaluation of library value and effectiveness from the library insider's vision to a portrayal grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the library user. Such a vision captures library use as experienced – and felt – by users and what differences each such use makes in their work, studies, play and recreation, home lives, and multitudes of circumstances of struggle and need.

This approach supplements, if not refocuses, our culture of assessment from institutional inputs and processes to user outcomes, benefits, impacts and changes. It embraces a human behaviour (and feeling) framework that is reflected in each and every act of library use, that is grounded in each and every choice *for* the library as a conscious and deliberate choice. This approach repositions our culture of assessment away from a supplier stance to a user stance, from insider to outsider, from library offerings to user meanings. As Peter Drucker wrote more than 30 years ago, and I believe it's still a great insight, "the one thing that can be said with absolute certainty about service institutions is that their publics do not have the same image of them as do the people who toil within them."[2]

It makes a profound difference in our understanding to approach library use as the personal and individual choices of library users – thousands of which choices are made every day, millions in a year. These choices represent strategic decisions made on the basis of the library user's time, energy, interests, familiarity, convenience, attitudes and feelings, together with perceptions of the library's credibility, reliability, functionality, and probably a plethora of other factors.

Our traditional reduction of user choices to statistical transactions – institutional transactions at that – abstracts and masks these profundities. A circulation transaction, for example, is not a simple commodity exchange. Rather, it represents, however poorly, an intentional choice on the part of a user to seek publications and information through the library.

This repositioning of assessment culture treats libraries as collections of users as much as collections of texts and information. It demands a customer orientation, not just customer service, and recognizes that value experienced by clients is not the same thing as value added by library staff. It focuses on client benefits and emotional satisfaction, rather than on library features and capacities, which are only potentials for benefit. It recognizes both cognitive and affective dimensions in user behaviour.

This repositioning understands traditional statistics as numerical or quantitative counts that represent the physical activities of service providers, not the intellectual and emotional impacts experienced by users. But the inference is always that circulation transactions and reference "stick counts" represent much more. In fact, however, they serve as weak surrogates for library value and meaning. To illustrate, from a user perception, borrowing materials from a library is an input – a potential for benefit, but not itself the benefit; and similarly, a library collection is a feature, whether numbered in the thousands or the millions of items – again, a potential for benefit that is not realized until someone uses an item for some purpose.

Moreover, the long-standing practice of referring to circulation and reference dealings as transactions and stick counts gives the impression of library activities as discrete entities – as "things" of uniformity, simplicity, physicality, repetitive actions and products. Treating library activities as statistical data elements reduces the deeply human behaviour of users to visible, surface moments of provider-bestowed performance. The notion of a reference transaction, for example, ignores the reality that users' reference questions are infinitely more variable in complexity, difficulty and time duration than is communicated by the singular equality of the stick count. Every library item consulted is unique in its textual characteristics, and collectively of infinite variability.

A worrisome disconnect

Another result of reductionist transactions and stick counts is to render invisible the many other services and activities that characterize libraries beyond collection lending and question answering. Those multiple dimensions of service are mere shadows in traditional library statistics. The result is the threat of a worrisome disconnect between reported performance measures and the allocation of library resource priorities. Moreover, the traditional focus on library inputs and processes means that we also tend to focus on costs and efficiencies rather than on value and benefits to users.

At the same time, it might be argued that one important move toward user-centric assessment is found in attempts to measure user satisfaction. While this is a step in the right direction, satisfied users alone do not prove, or predict, system success, because prior experiences mediate human judgments and ratings; the LibQUAL+ program developed by the Association of Research Libraries is one response to this phenomenon. User satisfaction is also a poor indicator of customer loyalty, system effectiveness and organizational leadership. Moreover, it is of little diagnostic value for identifying specific service weaknesses and needed improvements. Finally, statistical indicators of satisfaction levels do not alone shed light on the actual changes and behavioural transformations that library users undergo as a result of their library experiences.

In spite of such limitations, satisfaction ratings do encompass an important element in user-centric assessment culture – the affective and attitudinal dimensions of library user behaviour. Invisible and overlooked in stick counts, it is important to remember that emotion as well as intellect inheres in user experiences. So we have to study what users care and feel about in their encounters with library staff, services, collections and products. The challenge is to capture and articulate the endless stories of difference and transformation that libraries and library staff contribute to people's lives – the stories of life-changing outcomes of library choices. It is the *transformative nature of libraries* that must become the centre of our concerns. So we need not only statistics but stories as well.

Such evidence-based innovations in library service visualization – library service seen as the time, value and emotion-laden choices made by Canadians – will not be adopted and advanced without trial and tribulation. But we are warned of the traps of reductionism and commodification by Robert McNamara:

> The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can't be measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.[3]

I believe it is possible, however, to get on the radar of decision makers in all sectors of the profession. It will take

a huge mix of advocacy leadership and lobbying, social marketing and market research, commitment to user-centred service excellence, highly motivated staff, accountable management, and multiple, user-based feedback systems.

We need to recognize that one of the keys to influencing decision makers is to reflect back to them their own agendas and to remind them of their own high ground – for example, social cohesion, citizenship, quality of life, educational enhancement, literacy, economic development, scholarly discovery, research and development progress, marketing success, cultural enrichment, patent protection, human rights, and so on. And we have to learn how to communicate in their languages and in the context of their priorities, all the while conveying our passion for the contributions we know that librarians and libraries are making to Canadian society every day of the year.

Repositioning – rebranding – libraries in such ways will show decision makers and our user publics that libraries and library staff are positive investments in infrastructure and not cost centres and overheads, that libraries are revenue-generating and culture-generating services, that the human stories of library use are also the library stories of value and meaning, and that library users are our partners and co-creators in that value and those meanings.

Toward user-centric best practices

In its goal to become a knowledge-based society, it is difficult to imagine what Canada would look like without librarians and other library workers at the forefront, adding value to an ever-expanding universe of cultural, educational, literary, artistic, professional and business resources in formats as wide-ranging as pamphlets and photographs, websites and digital repositories, picture books and sound recordings. In short, it is difficult to imagine the cultural fabric and economic infrastructure of Canadian society without libraries and library service providers contributing to the construction of their communities. Together, these institutions and the people who work in them add both measurable and immeasurable value to our culture and our economy.

"Big picture questions" need to be formulated in an attempt to capture the effectiveness of Canadian library services in all sectors as the nation's primary access and delivery agencies for reading, culture, knowledge and information. Asking such questions that are indigenous to each sector is essential if we are to continue repositioning and rebranding ourselves as a research and evidence-based profession, and if we are to succeed in countering negative perceptions and long-standing problems of weak visibility, gendered images and casual accountability.

I hope this article will generate more dialogue among librarians on next steps in moving to a more powerful and persuasive model of user-centric best practices. In a nutshell, seeing library services through users' eyes means an understanding that:

- Library services are fleeting, transient, different every time for every user, and perceived differently by users and staff.
- Library service inputs are potentials for service.
- Library service outputs are library user inputs.
- Library service transactions are vehicles to library user experience and meaning.
- Library uses are about library user outcomes and impacts.
- Library user outcomes and impacts are effects on and changes in attributes such as knowledge, understandings, opinions, skills, beliefs, values, behaviour, attitudes, motivations, perceptions, expectations, feelings, satisfaction, loyalty, and still others.
- Library user value is not just value added by the library but value experienced by the library user.
- Library user satisfaction is not the same as library user benefits, outcomes, differences and impacts.
- Every library user interaction is a moment of truth in library service quality and value; word-of-mouth strongly influences if not dictates library reputation.
- Library users are partners and co-creators of library service quality and value.

To sum up: Transformations not transactions; benefits not features; value experienced not value added; and making a difference in people's lives. Telling their stories – telling ours.

Notes

1. "Benefits not Features, Transformations not Transactions: Capturing the Value-Added Impact of Library Services in Canada," which was published under the fine editorship of Yvon-André Lacroix as the final piece in a collection called *Reaching Out: Innovation in Canadian Libraries* in honour of the 74th annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions held in Quebec City in 2008, the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec by Samuel de Champlain. Or my longer article in the spring 2006 issue of ARGUS,

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learners – Anderson-Dargatz jumped right on board. "I was surprised at how much it gave me in the end as a writer and personally. While it's enjoyable and very satisfying, literary writing can be mentally fatiguing and taxing. But *The Stalker* was just fun and it took me back to my original engagement in writing, the pure pleasure of the story."

What equally surprised Anderson-Dargatz was the reach this Good Reads book had. "I got an email from a teacher in Rankin Inlet at the college saying they're using *The Stalker* and teaching students who never read a novel before," she says. (Each book comes with a 12-page teaching guide for literacy groups and classes.) "I do book club events online for people in isolated areas and they asked me to do one for them. I was quite astounded that here's this book I wrote being used way up there and being enjoyed and it's reaching people who've never read a novel before. It absolutely delighted me."

Hooked

To date, the reaction to the series, which is also available in bookstores through HarperCollins Canada, has been overwhelmingly positive, says Livingston. "Many of the library systems building these collections are aware of the lack of material that's out there and are responding very well to these books," she says.

That includes people such as Kathleen Williams. "The learners at our library were excited about the readability level," says Williams, coordinator of outreach and adult literacy programming for the Winnipeg Public Library. "One gentleman got up after an event and shook Deborah Ellis's hand because he was touched that someone cared enough to write for his readability. He thought it was a great book and the content resonated. He particularly appreciated the short chapters, which helped him not be overwhelmed by content."

At the Edmonton Public Library, the reaction was similar. "I love the series because it takes great Canadian authors and creates original high-quality stories for an adult learner audience," says Caroline Land, literary services librarian at the Centre for Reading and the Arts at the library. "So many of the books for adult learners are novelizations, adaptations or other 'changed' works that foster the idea that adult learners are 'different' or 'not as good.' These stories, though, are enjoyable to such a wide variety of audiences. In fact, my father bought one unknowingly, not because he wanted a book for an adult learner, but because he saw that Louise Penny had a new book out! I can't wait for the next series of books."

Land won't have to wait long, since the second series of books is set to be released in 2011, with works written by recognizable names such as Joseph Boyden, the 2008 winner of the Scotiabank Giller Prize; 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner Marina Endicott; Joy Fielding, the *New York Times* bestselling author; acclaimed writer Robert Hough; Ottawa-born novelist Anthony Hyde; and Frances Itani, a fiction writer and poet and winner of the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The series is also inspiring the production of similar Canadian series, such as Rapid Reads from B.C.-based Orca Books.

Good Reads also happens to fulfill the other literacy mandate, namely sparking a lifelong interest in reading. "So many literacy programs out there are very skill focused – you need literacy skills to get a job and let's focus on getting those skills you'd use in a workplace," says Livingston. "But that's not how you build lifelong readers. You hook them with good stories."

Along with being a voracious reader, Astrid Van Den Broek is a magazine writer whose articles have appeared in magazines such as Chatelaine, Today's Parent, Canadian Living, Homemakers *and more.*

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"400 Million Circs, 40 Million Reference Questions," based on a presentation I gave at the annual conference of the Corporation of Professional Librarians of Quebec a couple of years earlier. Or my 2003 *Feliciter* article "More Libraries than Tim Hortons and McDonald's" *(Feliciter* 49.3).

2. Peter Drucker, "Managing the Public Service Institution," *College and Research Libraries* (January 1976), p. 5.
3. Robert McNamara, quoted by Charles Handy in *The Age of Paradox.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994, p. 221.

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Look for Dr. Schrader's session, with the same title as this article, at the 2011 CLA National conference in Halifax. Views expressed here are those of the author.