A Reporter at Large

MARGERY CLOSEY QUIGLEY

A half century ago library administrators with conscience and daring tore down the wrought iron grilles and wickets through which would-be borrowers had for years been pushing call slips and then waiting for the pages to make reports. Thus there was gradually brought into universal acceptance the policy of the open shelves which changed so wonderfully and forever the physical and mental life of the public library supplicant for books for home use.

In the early days of the liberalized public library which followed there evolved a system of records of loans, under the catch-title of the Newark Charging System, described on page 37, which eventually received wide adoption. It added to public library operation, and the circulation process in particular, a second principle about lending almost as revolutionary as that of the open shelves. It made clear that for the lending of public library books a process is essential, for businesslike control of records of “who borrows what,” which could, if desired, be operated by “pages.” At the same time the process would aim at increased convenience for the borrower.

A few lesser but significant policies involving the circulation process were subsequently accepted, before serious economic and social pressures dominated librarians’ thinking. One of these is publicity, later public relations, or the obligation to interpret the public library’s services and goals. Another is the search for opportunities for customer participation. The outstanding example of this latter policy is the old Detroit Charging System, which for young children still remains an extremely pleasing and useful educational experience. Another popular instance is that glorified gadget, the bookdrop, helpful inside or outside of the building, built into the facade or remotely set up. Other important developments with customer participation can come about almost immediately, if desired, through continuous affiliation with the local telephone company.

The author is retired Librarian, Montclair, New Jersey, Free Public Library.
A Reporter at Large

In addition there has of necessity been recognized, though not as yet dramatically nor popularly because of present costs and bothersome details, the priceless principle of interlibrary cooperation. In the circulation process this principle is manifested severally as inter-branch loan, the universal borrower’s card good within an entire library system, interlibrary loan by person, mail, telephone, messenger, or express; and the semi-permanent interlibrary borrower’s card. The last, established through local agreements or legislation, has been most completely developed between English public libraries.

These gestures of cooperation, taken together, represent a potential in improved circulation service beyond the power of imagination. The prime result of present cooperation should be that those responsible for securing proper legislation and funds for regional libraries will be informed and ready when plans for regional public libraries come up for consideration.

Open shelves, business-like procedure akin to individual commercial charge accounts, publicity, customer participation, and interlibrary cooperation—the circulation process of today has inherited this series of obligations. They constitute five binding principles without which the lending of books by the publicly supported library would cease to fulfill one of the main purposes of a public library. They have genuinely changed and enriched the circulation process. Despite this fact, the process itself is apt, in the modern library, to be the most uninspired, unprogressive and unrewarding of those services dealing directly with the public. In view of this, what principle can today’s circulation process contribute in its turn? This writer suggests that a fresh conception which accepts clerical records and machines as essential, but which is distinguished by a primary concern with the borrower and his reactions to the library’s books, could be this contribution. What parts of the circulation process by some sort of fairly simple revision can be made to test out this formula for a fresh conception?

During recent years, with the assistance of business and industrial firms, there has been a continuous and intensive search for technical devices which might be injected with profit into the circulation process. Approximately a dozen such possible installations are on the market. With rising costs and the scarcity of personnel, librarians have been eager to test these devices as they appear.

From the pioneer, the electrically operated Gaylord Charging Machine on, each has used the basic idea of the Newark Charging System, that is, a mobile transaction card with a life span as long or
as short as the borrower’s cooperation. Each of the machines has proved effective when fitted carefully, through management techniques, into the individual setting, when operated properly, and controlled by, not controlling, staff assignments. Machine charging improves at once the relationship between the borrower and the desk assistant, by eliminating fatigue for the assistant, preventing numerous tensions common hitherto, and ending the bottlenecks of waiting lines.

As research continues other mechanical aids adaptable to library circulation processes may be expected. Machines now popular will be improved, even superseded. Coming models may easily be small, portable, relatively cheap, and thus useful in bookmobiles, rural stations, and other service points removed from the main charging desks. Many of the present files and other records on cards or in code will surely be by-passed.

The new contribution to the basic principles of circulation work should not, however, depend on the charging machines or the application of management engineering. Each of these blessings is really a set of business techniques successfully contributing to labor saving, time saving, and space making. Library administrators, resourceful and aware, welcome these obligatory improvements, so successful and so long desired. Nevertheless, they still must find additional professional library policies which will vitalize the present languishing circulation process as a whole.

The main trouble with the circulation process today, even with charging machines, microfilms, and electronics is that, from registration on through the treatment of hopeless overdues, the process itself is not contemporary. In the eyes of many library users both the rules and the setting, including furniture, of his public library are out-of-date, comical, or provoking. Many of the findings and practices of other professions which deal constructively with human beings in like situations are not utilized appreciably. Therefore, the contemporary action, the possible fresh concept, recommended in this paper is concerned entirely with rapport. Its aim is to make the borrowing experience unhurried and sound, and to substitute a sense of “membership” for “getting a card.”

In the last analysis the hard core of the circulation process in American public libraries is a true game of chance, and nothing more. The path of the so-called transaction, that is, the recording of each “who borrowed what” and the cancelling of the record of this individual loan when the book is returned, ends in what is fundamentally the
principle of Lotto, or Bingo. This is the matching of a chance set of numbers against a master deck. It makes no difference whether the records of “who borrowed what” are made, as they are now, on cards, film, paper tape, wire, in punches, in code, in handwriting, by typewriter, slugs, metal plates, voice, or photography. It makes no real difference, either, whether the matching is done by electric impulses, as by collator or other matching machine, by a knitting needle, by arranging in a predetermined sequence and then extracting single returns by hand, or rapidly matched on a table top or through the use of lettered pigeon holes or ruled cloth or boards.

For that matter, on five minutes notice, given a typewriter or adding machine and a deck of prenumbered slips packaged in numerical order, anyone who knows how to operate either of these two common office appliances can set up and start immediate functioning of a neat, workable, labor saving system of charging by machine which observes all the necessary principles and can produce the answers about outs and overdues, and circulation totals for any month, week, day, or part of a day. At the end of a period of matching the library assistant has in her hands a bundle of unanalyzed information, which being interpreted is able to reveal the title of many a book once judged worthy of fusion with the library’s permanent book collection and now too long absent. She also has the name and address, after another review of the situation, of each person who theoretically should now be served with a writ of some sort.

This is only a small start on the baffling problems which lie ahead of the captive Bingo-playing clerk and her colleagues, too, who must work upon the task of retrieving the volumes absent without leave. On the whole, the notices and the trivial authority available to these clerks are ineffective because these meager provisions are neither amiable nor psychologically sound. Also, the borrower’s original signature and address are not necessarily trustworthy and may take patience to untangle.

In this interminable game as played in a public library, the library always loses. The better the library’s book collection, the more frequent is the temptation to opportunist borrowers and in consequence the bigger the losses. Losses from hopeless overdues would represent a goodly sum if calculated in terms of replacement costs. It is safe to say that the whole procedure of sending out overdue notices needs livening diversification and advertising psychology applied to every step. In this problem, educational and social, is a large spot to which to shift an unhampered, practical, and somewhat humorous librarian
who would cooperate steadily and constructively with social workers, teachers, police, collection agents, and public relations men.

At the other end of the hard core of the circulation process, that is, at the beginning of the transaction and a prerequisite to it, is registration, a process as dry and formal as the political connotation of the word itself. The approach recommended here is not much more than a simple shift, or interruption of a regular duty, for a professional worker who knows the content and style of many books. This library assistant, with rapport in her heart, a modified and salvaged form of readers' advisory service in her mind, and a fountain pen in her hand, would go not necessarily to a registration desk but to any pleasant, comfortable area where not a file, a stand-up counter, nor a desk is in sight, where she easily transmutes the brusque experience of 'getting a card' into a leisurely and personal discussion of book needs and tastes in reading, topped off by a short induction ceremony such as a guided tour of the public areas or the gift of a pertinent pamphlet.

The two-minute registration would probably change at most to a five or ten minute interview and tour. After all, until some startling library event occurs such as the opening of a neighborhood branch or a new main library building, the daily statistics of new registrations usually show an appallingly small number for the size of the community. All later experiences involved in borrowing books could be similarly improved by brief informal interviews with librarians who enjoy applying modern psychology, public relations, and their knowledge of book and reading habits.

There is now good reason, and in fact need, to make a larger initial investment in briefing and indoctrinating the beginning users of the public library, prolonging the time when the borrower feels free to discuss books and library service with "a real librarian," rather than to curtail the introductory interview and afterward to pay through the nose for the cut, by later frustrations and fewer repeat customers.

During the overlong years of testing and then acceptance of a very few liberal principles which will in all likelihood endure, certain specific traditional behaviors have continued. These might now be queried to advantage. In architecture today many old houses which were thought to be worse than useless have been reconstructed and made practical and pleasant for a specific family's daily use. At the same time surprising charm and personality have been added through original approaches to the problems. Likewise it has been proven possible in numerous recent jobs of drastic simplification of the circu-
A Reporter at Large

lation process to preserve a modicum of what might be dubbed the vested interests and come out with something like unto the old dominating concept, but much better. Modifications will certainly prove acceptable if they concern the library’s present circulation statistics, which pile up with hardly ever a consultation in years because they preserve information which no longer makes the least bit of difference to the operation of the library. One great library does not bother with obtaining detailed circulation figures. We ponder on an investment in scales which, for example, counted precious ration coupons at a glance.

Other questionings which may lead to possible modifications, salvage and short cuts now unobserved are:

1. What records stemming from the circulation process already exist in another form in other records of the library, or of another community institution whose records are open to the library authorities by law, such as the delinquent tax records, the burial permits, and the permits to move the household goods out of the community, or in records open by courtesy or membership, such as the confidential central index of the clients of the local social agencies?

2. How may staff members become enthusiastic for, or even interested in, making more parts of the circulation process more personal, professional, and contemporary?

3. Has the standard suggestion box technique been put into effect to improve the situations connected with non-mechanical circulation procedures?

4. May the public often rightly consider the registration interview a travesty of business-like identification, or an insult to men and women equipped with the documents recognized by government agencies as valid identification?

5. Today with the “deskless executive office” popular in the public relations field, and with the search by therapists and psychologists for ways to make the handicapped comfortable, must the monolithic registration counter go on existing?

The circulation department has, in its location, area, personnel, and latent talents, furnishings, machines, layout, rules, traditions, supplies, and printing, variables good and bad which make it impossible to change into the likeness of some other, admirable library, but not impossible to make imaginative, purposeful, practical alterations. This is a challenge for the library staff—and, up to a point, for the Board of Trustees and the Friends of the Library. This is good fortune for
the borrowers who on the whole like informality, cheerfulness, courtesy, style, comfort, and competence.

Fortunately also, outside pressure for better book borrowing service is already resulting from the phenomenal growth of population and massive shifting of family homes to open areas in suburbs or country. Regional libraries are bound to come soon, with pressure forcing interloan service to expand, improve and simplify its present routines.

How can one summarize in a pleasant and self-respecting cliché the contribution of a clean heart and a right spirit which any staff member may make toward strengthening the circulation process, so that those of the reading public who go through the membership interview will want to use the library again and again? Rapport, flexibility, the contemporary approach, individual prescriptions, personalizing—none of these words and phrases is normal and sincere enough. The nearest formula librarians have come up with as yet, to this author's way of thinking, is the descriptive phrase, "a public library for the whole family." In a stimulating book from England entitled Reconstruction and the Home, its architect author, Howard Robertson, writes, "Finally, one would plead for a freedom to design with variety, . . . The age is inclined to be self-conscious; but, after all, one main function of domestic architecture is to make people happy, so designers need feel no great shame in frankly accepting that task, with all that it implies." Those public librarians who design staff policy for the circulation process likewise need feel no great shame in frankly accepting the task of making borrowers happy, with all that it implies.

References
