

Old Dog; No Tricks: Perceptions of the Qualitative Analysis of Book Collections

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF WORKING with projects concerning collection development have taught me that there are two principal functions that can be reduced to simple either/or choices expressed through a variety of simplistic formulae: in/out, add/subtract or—in more familiar library terminology—acquire/discard.

My use of these formulae requires, ultimately, a method of subjective evaluation of nearly every book individually by using a library's catalog, selective bibliographies, and examination of the books themselves, all the while studying the history of the library's acquisitions. This requires special techniques that range all the way from checking titles against bibliographies to application of the accumulated knowledge of specialized bookpersons qualified to understand why a book should be added to or removed from a collection.

“In”: The Acquisitions Policy Statement

A decision with regard to a collection, whether considering classes of subject literature or a single pamphlet, is “in or out?” The answer should be based upon previously established guidelines written down in an Acquisitions Policy Statement, hereinafter called an APS.

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The style for writing an APS may vary from a formal statement to a brief outline. Whether it is written as a subjective statement or as an analytically mathematical formula based upon circulation, volume counts, budget, or some other factors, it is meant to answer that question: "In or out?"

Nothing in a library—whether the library serves a great university, a small rural community or a business facility—is so important as the *written* APS. From the administrator's point of view, the APS serves the library in the same way as a national constitution does. It expresses the ideals and goals of a group dedicated to a particular purpose and meaning, and it helps them to strive together to attain reasonably well-defined objectives through a realistic growth pattern. Like the United States' Constitution, however, it can be amended. Changing needs of the community the library serves must always be considered, and the statement can be revised without destroying or damaging the basic and sound purpose of a library.

The APS for a large library should be written at several levels—for the overall institution, for its divisions, sections, or branches; similarly for a smaller library; and even for a one-person staff in a one-room library—a stated policy should be written and it must be understood by all who will be affected by it.

Only in this way can a proper and worthy collection be acquired, maintained, directed, and controlled; and only with a *written* APS can there be provision for continuity of policies affecting the future of the library. Administrators and librarians come and go, but as they do, the APS can help to hold the library on a steady course.

As I have suggested, the APS is not an inflexible law that supersedes the need to change, to vary policy or to inhibit intelligent redirection. I do not think that the APS is ever meant to be a rigid and unchangeable document. Indeed, I believe that any APS should be under study constantly and always kept in mind, respected as a library's guiding light. Nevertheless, at the same time, there should be a regular formal review of its content, applicability and efficacy insofar as it has served for the previous years and seems relevant to the long-term future. I suggest formal review and discussion of interim recommendations every third or fifth year (preferably the latter) in order that the statement may be applied over an adequate testing period.

Having proposed that within an institution, an APS should be written at every level, so should each department's special statement be reviewed and coordinated with revisions of statements at levels above it to avoid conflict of purpose or contradictory changes. As to the process

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of revision of the APS, I believe that everyone at the library should have a say at the appropriate level with which he or she is associated. The knowledgeable persons should (or ought!) to be the librarians who work with the collections, but everyone with ideas should be invited to contribute—all professional staff, student assistants, pages, volunteers, faculty, and any regular patrons of the collections. In the area of special collections, even donors should be given a voice and so should Friends of the Library, where such supportive groups exist.

The purpose of the APS is inspirational and policy should be trimmed of broad generalities and—at any level—should be as specific as necessary: “The library will collect such and such in depth; it will collect foreign language materials except exotic scripts and similarly unusual characters; recognizing the much older collections at the nearby university, it will not collect early literature (before 1900) except for important authors basic to the subject and then only in the best standard editions....”and so on.

All or any part of this kind of statement can be changed to meet new needs—a new course, a changing population, an increased (or decreased) budget allowance, disuse of the collection, or no foreseeable responsibility to maintain or even to retain it for any reason, etc. At lower levels, even price range restrictions may be made: “All purchases of \$100 or more will be approved by _____; or “should be considered by the Book Selection Committee;” or, “will be discussed with faculty or a cooperative purchasing library,” etc.

Desiderata Files

Nearly as important as the Acquisitions Policy Statement is the continuing growth of a systematic review of all relevant literature by the book selectors. In order to assure the viability of a collection, as defined or directed by the APS, it is necessary that the selectors should constantly review the literature in their fields and be aware of publications, availability, cost, and relevance. To this end, desiderata files are as useful as the APS but they should be revised continuously.

In my experience, very few people know the way to build a really helpful library desiderata file, but over the years it has become obvious to me that there is only one way to assure a file's usefulness: *believe* that there is no limitation to accessible money. In any case, do not decide that “we couldn't afford that; we need this more,” and then fail to add a title to the file.

First of all, money may really be available from a generally unknown or obscure source. Second, the responsible book selector who is keeping

collections up-to-date, or reaching for standards of excellence, is serving as a guide for collection development and money must not be a deserving factor in considering a title, even though it may be the decisive one.

That important but expensive title must be added to the desiderata file. A file of quality and excellence built on this basis helps a great deal when funds are available for retrospective buying, when money comes from unexpected sources, or when pressures of readers' needs insist that available money has got to be spent because the book is indispensable. More importantly, the file keeps staff alert to collection inadequacies or weaknesses that should, in time, be repaired by acquisition of these very tools that were passed over and have not been superseded. As a simple but effective rule, then, always treat the desiderata file as though there is no limitation on money and as a nearly perfect instrument to use in retrospective buying.

Along with many factors that are clearly a part of collection development, the Acquisitions Policy Statement and the desiderata file are two that I feel are the most necessary and effective ones. Thus my consideration of the "in" element at this time.

"Out": The Case For Library Review

Nothing diminishes the effective vitality of a collection, large or small, so much as dead books on the shelves. In conjunction with this belief, let me remind readers that, as a professional librarian, consultant for collection development, researcher, and antiquarian bookseller, I am extremely conscious of the intellectual, social, historical (and, yes, monetary), values of old books. A library that does not aim at "collections of record" in its APS, however, is doing disservice to patrons who deserve the best and who want either to use books or to browse in stacks for serendipitous finds.

The quality of collections whose shelves are burdened with textbooks must be considered dubious if the texts are more than five or ten years old—almost no matter what the subject. Specialists reviewing the shelves will know the important books (even *some* textbooks) to be retained, but what a kindness it is to readers to remove all of those old *Introduction to...*, *Manual of...*, *Handbook for...*, *Laboratory Guide...*, and similar titles that can, mostly, be chosen for discard by spine-reading at the shelves or by riffling through the library's catalog.

At one large university library where I used this method recently—in a field I know well, of course—I literally threw out one third of the entire nonhistorical open-stack collection. Circulation then rose by over 50 percent within six months, apparently for no other reason than

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increased viability of the collection after removal of the dead titles. We threw the books out because—of the better ones—we had offered nearly 2000 titles for sale to students, faculty and others, at fifty cents each over a week's time, and sold no more than forty. Thus was the quality of the lot!

Of course, weeding programs must consider books other than textbooks and similar publications because all books, like people, do not ease into old age gracefully. They fall apart physically and many of them (perhaps most) lose much of their perspicacity just the way the rest of us do—and, think of it, books are only the verbal expressions of people. Perhaps recognition of this fact may help us to moderate our absurd and almost universal veneration of every book. Incidentally, for several years I have been trying to introduce the term *library review program* or *library review project*, rather than use the word *weeding*. The latter has a very negative connotation and irritates library boards, donors, patrons, staff, and newspapers in particular, even though the procedure is both a necessary and a useful one. "Reviewers" are not destroying the collection, they are improving it! "Weeders" are thought to be dismembering collections.

If the review project is to be consummated properly and with some consistency, I believe that the persons best qualified to undertake it are the librarians who work with the collection. Unfortunately, I know of too few librarians today who are bookpersons in the sense that they are well grounded as readers or as students of the retrospective literature of subjects with which they are dealing and I am not sanguine for the future. This is not my place, though, to argue counter-arguments, so I will propose a solution that I have found to be an effective and enjoyable approach for librarians even though it requires much additional staff work.

"Additional staff work!" "We're already swamped." "Couldn't possibly." is what I have usually heard, with all the expected explanations and excuses. Well, in the performance of two of my major collection surveys (most successfully at the Toronto and Vancouver public libraries), staff time was assured by administrators who guaranteed the availability of a set number of hours or regular work time for every staff member in every department concerned with the projects. Objections persisted of course, but the time was ordered to be taken, with all kinds of schedule adjustments, because the libraries' administrators recognized the absolute need for the review projects. I should add that both of these library projects were scheduled over two years during which time I visited every other month for two weeks. In my absence, staff continued

at their project-assigned tasks during the hours scheduled for them and within their regular working hours. There was no overtime work.

My system for operating requires many hours of staff time, lots of internal cooperation and understanding, some ingenuity, some insight, some originality, and, also essential, subject awareness. For these reasons—mostly the time element—the administrative costs of these projects can be large, and, though the results make for a good analysis of the collections, achieving this goal must be acknowledged to be of great importance before an administration can encumber itself with such a demanding commitment of staff time and money.

At this juncture it is expedient to digress momentarily and note that most reviews of collections need not cover a library's entire holdings at the same time, nor at all, though it is important to set dates by which time certain areas will be completed. Small parts of a classified library can be examined separately, which will take fewer hours of work. The Canadian projects had to be completed within time limits in anticipation of scheduled building programs and regional planning.

I should return, momentarily, to the matter of staffing, having said that it is most desirable that the library staff should review the collection. This is possible and successful under the procedures described in this paper; on the other hand, it has always been my experience (in spite of what still may be said in library schools) that it is generally a mistake to ask faculty members to participate in a collection review. Perhaps at another time, in a more appropriate place, I will set forth my reasoning; but my argument begins long before the brief remarks in my small book, *Yale's Selective Book Retirement Program*¹ and I urge its perusal on anyone participating in a review project. I am not stubborn about it, but I seem never to have had cause to modify my opinion, which is indeed, unfortunate and disappointing.

The Review Process

Perhaps I am too ignorant of the possibly valid use of various statistical or mathematical formulae proposed in the library research literature today. My understanding has been, though, that while these formulae may have been shown to have worked in one library, they are usually too costly in time and too difficult to apply—in terms of learning their techniques, modifying their controls, and selecting data for interpretation—to consider using them in other libraries. Most of them are based upon circulation records, publication dates or other data seldom referable directly to patron use. Even worse, they take the charac-

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ter of the books' contents out of the game for anyone who cares for such and believes it to be significant.

To begin a description of the methodology of subjective collection reviews, which is the only way I can conceive of my doing it, I first talk to the entire assembled staff or, at least, to all who are to be concerned with the review project. This talk is meant to explain objectives, to relieve any fears about "destroying the collection," to encourage anticipation by suggesting that it will all be lots of fun (like relearning subject fields) and lots of hard work that will interfere with routines but which the administration says must be done, and to assure staff that my own direction is only meant to be helpful, to give some guidance and to keep the train on the tracks and moving at a regular pace within the time allowed to us. I emphasize the fact that we will write a report together, which means that staff will have an opportunity to read it and correct my misjudgments, and, while I may not change a statement of my opinion unless I am shown to be in error, if an opposing opinion is of real importance it will be included in the final report. In the Toronto survey, for example, the music librarian disagreed with my qualitative evaluation of this part of the collection when I quoted a young Yorkville musician's ardent opinion that the library's collection of printed materials "just isn't with it." Over a page of text was allowed to the music librarian's response, with which I was not in total agreement.²

Next, I explain that, library department by library department, I will meet with the staff members to discuss their problems and objectives, and that they are to choose for their individual selves those parts of their departmental collections on which they wish to work. When libraries are classified by the Dewey Decimal classification, I ask the staff to divide their department's Dewey tens (e.g., 700, 710, 720) among the members of the department staff. Dividing the Library of Congress classification presents only a few additional inconveniences. Since many libraries do not have an APS, this is the time to review what may have been considered policy or to work on a draft APS in the briefest form, in order to provide some guidelines at least for the review project.

For each of the subdivided parts of the classification, I ask the person responsible for it to find ten annotated or qualitatively evaluating bibliographies. This is not always possible but, teacher-like, I insist on five even though they may have to resort to borrowing through interlibrary loan. Even on projects where I work alone, I make the same demand upon myself. For an explanation of how I study to review collections for appraisals, see two articles in *AB Bookman's Weekly*.³ When the five to ten bibliographies are in hand, we discuss their usefulness, and the reviewers are off and running. A library's own copies

of bibliographies may usually be pencil marked; borrowed books are copied and marked if they are to be marked.

Bibliographies are studied and, where related to the first brief draft APS, they are checked against the library's cataloged holdings. Symbols, arbitrarily designated, are noted in margins—such as “have,” “don't have,” “should have,” “don't want,” or otherwise. The “should haves” are transcribed by clerks assigned to the project, thus making separate card entries for the desiderata file. The desiderata file can be divided as to *must* orders and titles for possible later acquisition. The project clerks also keep any desired counts of titles against bibliographies, and so on.

If my contract requires that I must provide a written qualitative report for collection development, and a written draft of an APS for consideration, I must study the checked bibliographies and the evolving desiderata lists; do an at-the-shelf examination of the collection; and talk further with departmental staffs, administration; and make a sampling of users—public, student or faculty. Actually, for myself, as a bookperson, the most informative part of this phase of the selection is my own examination of the books on the shelves. Why this is, it is probably impossible to say and equally difficult to understand, but—as most bibliophilic scholars have put it, without sensible discussion—it is generally laid to a “sixth sense.” Subjective? Yes!

Really Reviewing

In reality there is considerable risk to allowing what I have called a “bookperson” sole responsibility for selecting what should remain and what is to be removed: in/out. It is likely that years of specialized knowledge have been applied to building a collection that ought not to be torn apart no matter what self-confidence the bookperson may have. I can hardly be accused of excessive humility, but even after nearly half a century with books in all subjects, and my diligence in preparing for a review project (as described in the second of the two articles in *AB Bookman's Weekly*,⁴ I know that it really is not necessary for me to take all the responsibility, and that I really should not be allowed to do so.

In a library—with projects such as the Toronto and Vancouver reviews—the staff are themselves reasonably able to make the decisions about a collection or subject area for which they have direct responsibilities and, insofar as I was concerned, my job was to give direction to the collection review. In an academic situation that will not involve the faculty nor the library staff directly, there is another way of achieving what must be done.

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In an academic institution, representative faculty may be invited to review the selections, but, as I have mentioned (and discussed in the matter of the Yale project⁵), this is seldom a helpful or desirable way of working. The most efficient and successful pattern that I have discovered was used over a long survey of several years' duration (one week a month, October through May), at the American Museum of Natural History's library collection of nearly 200,000 volumes); similar procedures were used at the Yale University Medical Library's stack collection, and are presently underway at the Peabody Library of Johns Hopkins University. All three of these collections were of about the same size and I have been the sole selector.

My "way out" of ultimate responsibility was first instituted at the American Museum of Natural History Library where full authority to act on my own judgment was given by the director of the museum and two successive chief librarians. My challenging directive was to go through the entire collection, book by book, to indicate any valuable items that would contribute to a new division of the library that I would establish relative to "the history of natural history, and rare books" in the collection. I was also to determine which books should be refurbished, repaired or rebound (by a large in-house conservation project that at that time paralleled the collection review project), and to select those books identified as duplicates or out-of-scope and salable by various methods not pertinently described here.

The chief librarian and I worked out the parameters of the definitions that were to be applied to each of the three objectives just listed, and the procedure went forward under my unrestricted direction. Details of selection were my own and, to begin, the reference and acquisitions librarians and I made appointments so that together we visited each of the curatorial departments before I began to attack the book collections. We asked that the entire department meet with us to discuss present and anticipated use of the library's materials in their fields, and as they foresaw the direction of their researches for the next five, even ten years. These discussions were particularly helpful to us. At this time we explained the review project carefully and invited the curators' ideas over the next years. The curatorial departments were considered as faculty departments, which indeed they are. The next step was for me to spend as much time as necessary in my examination of the books on the shelves.

The true *review* began when, after I had put color-coded "p-slips," referable to the three categories for which I was selecting (used consistently in all my projects: blue, transfer to rare books; green, repair; pink,

sell), into all of the books about which I had made some decision. The chief librarian then sent notice to every member of the scientific staff—not just the curators of the department directly involved—that I had completed my survey and invited them to examine my selections at the shelves. Since there was no question of eliminating books chosen for transfer to “rare books” or for repair, they were asked to limit their attention to the books marked for withdrawal and sale. The reason for inviting all of the scientific staff to the review was that their fields all overlap and an ichthyologist might well be concerned with books about amphibia or an ornithologist with astronomy.

Invited staff were given a full month in which to visit the stacks to conduct their examination of the results of the review project's selection; longer in the summertime when they might be off on expeditions or vacations. If they disagreed with my decisions they were to initial and date the pink slip. At first, during the “lack of trust” period there were lots of decisions that they questioned, and often I learned a great deal from staff members when I returned the next month to examine their selections and discuss the books with them. As the years went on, however, and intimacy and trust grew between us, fewer and fewer of the staff came to review the “out” books and, indeed, the staff turned to the acquisitions and reference librarians, and to me, for advice about both library and personal book purchases. I must emphasize again that projects like those described here, if done correctly, must plan on the regularly scheduled use of a lot of staff time and unless this is allowed will not be completed satisfactorily, so it can be a costly effort.

That's it, essentially, based upon nearly fifty years of working with books and libraries. I will very likely always believe that, for the practicing librarian, subjective approaches—rather than mathematical formulae or statistical devices—are the only realistic solutions for the qualitative evaluation of collections. I believe in the value and importance of selectors' personal relationships with book collections. The methodology is essentially subjective, as is much of the process by which books first enter the library.

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