LIS 601 Fieldwork Report

Kailua Public Library: Trends in Library and Reference Services

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FIELDWORK REPORT
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<div align="center">Kailua Public Library: Trends in Library and Reference Services</div>

<u>Introduction</u>

I conducted my fieldwork observation at the Kailua Public Library (KPL), part of the Hawaii State Public Library System (HSPLS), in Kailua, Hawaii. At the suggestion of the librarians, I conducted my formal observation on Saturday, March 14, 2015 from 10am to 12pm. I recorded data for 90-100 minutes before approaching the reference desk to interview the reference librarians. Since this is the library that my family uses, I was able to conduct shorter, informal observations at other times of day and days of the week. However, most of the information in this report was recorded during the formal observation period.

<u>Theoretical Framework</u>

Many people, librarians in particular, are questioning the future of public libraries. As with most government entities, public libraries have experienced budget cuts in recent times. But the need for public libraries is more important than ever. The call for print materials might be decreasing, but the demand for free internet access and digital services is growing. Bertot, Gorham, Jaeger, & Taylor (2012) say that we can no longer separate public libraries from public internet access. But increased use has not been accompanied by extra funding and the downturn of economy has exacerbated the public's needs; causing people to turn to libraries for inexpensive entertainment, employment seeking information, and an outlet to brush up on tech skills needed in the job market. Oftentimes, the only free computer access that some have to turn to is public libraries. Former ALA president Rettig (2009) claims that "libraries are America's first responders to the economic crisis"

Accompanying this growth in digital use and demand has been a shift in the kind of reference services that the public requires. Patrons are better at locating simpler material on their own and only need help for the more difficult questions. Cassell & Hiremath (2012) and Zabel (Trends…Part 1, 2005) recognize that reference interactions have been decreasing since 1998 and that the face of reference and information services is changing. Traditional components that people used to associate with libraries - large print collections and reference services - may no longer have the same significance. Stephens (2006) warns that libraries need to adapt to the services that are in demand for their community. They need to be responsive, inviting, and proactive. One library might invest in more computers, one might require more large print books, and another might design more pleasing interior.

Recent studies raise questions for the future of library management. How much internet access is enough? How can libraries balance digital needs with print collections and other services? How can libraries rebrand themselves as relevant, necessary parts of the community that are worth fighting for? And most importantly, how can libraries accomplish these tasks with shrinking budgets? The Public Library Association (2015) has published a strategic plan and the Reference Users and Services Association (2015) has a vision and values statement and a strategic plan that acknowledges and attempts to address these concerns. But it is up to individual library systems to decide if, when, and by which methods to implement these strategies.

KPL shares the vision and mission statement of the HSPLS (About HSPLS, 2012). HSPLS's vision statement is: "The Hawaii State Public Library System is the educational, informational, and cultural heart of Hawaii's communities." The mission statement is: "The Hawaii State Public Library System nurtures a lifelong love of reading and learning through its

staff, collections, programs, services, and physical and virtual spaces." Both statements are vague enough to imply a dedication to changing to meet the needs of the residents of the state of Hawaii – or not. So the question remains, is KPL responding to trends in public library service?

My objective of this project is to identify trends in library and reference services specific to KPL, compare them to trends in public libraries nationwide, and make recommendations, supported by previous research, for how KPL can be more responsive to the community which it serves.

Community Profile

KPL branch is located in the town of Kailua on the island of Oahu in Hawaii, USA. The United States Census Bureau (2015) reports that as of the 2010 census, Kailua town had 38,635 residents composed of the following races: 44% White, 0.6% African American, 20.3% Asian, 6.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 6.5% Hispanic/Latino, and 27.3% two or more races. The median household income was $97,883 and 6.5% of the residents were living at the poverty level or below. 95.0% of Kailua residents were high school graduates and 44.5% of the residents held a Bachelor's degree or higher.

According to the Kailua Public Library Fact Sheet (2012), KPL served 200,980 patrons in house and an additional 6,396 patrons by phone in the 2011-2012 fiscal year. The report claimed that 6,292 reference questions were processed in the same year and reported 297,662 circulations. 42,502 library card holders accessed a collection size of 89,208 items. 55,900 items were used in house. The library hosted 12,166 Internet sessions. Not represented in the census information tourists and homeless populations that utilize the library as well.

During my visits, I observed a mix of ages and races of patrons compatible with the data above. At first glance, the library collection, both print and digital, seemed to reflect the needs of the community, although I would need to do a more in depth questioning in order to confirm that claim.

Scenes/Interviews

During the formal observation time (I sat in the cubicle seating near the reference desk, see Appendix A), there was a light but steady stream of patrons utilizing the library. At any time, there were about 24 patrons in the building, spread out in different areas. The patrons were engaged in the following activities: reading, looking up materials on the OPAC, using computers, and selecting items. If patrons approached the library staff, it was mostly to check out materials or to inquire about library cards. The circulation staff was busy with circulation tasks and issuing cards. At the reference desk, the two librarians worked at their computer terminals; one processed new books into the system. At one point, a circulation librarian came over to discuss schedules with the branch manager, Lucy (all names have been changed).

Only 7 reference interactions occurred during my observation period: a request about obtaining a library card, a question about how long one could remain on the computers, a face-to-face question about locating a book on the shelves, a telephone request to locate and hold a book, a request for the wireless access code, a request for the daily newspaper, and and interaction that I could not overhear. A sample interaction went something like this:

PATRON: (*approaches desk*)

LIBRARIAN: (*looks up from computer and makes eye contact, smiles*) What can I help you with? (*greeting, open question, approachability, interest*)

PATRON: How can I sign up to get on a computer? (*remains standing*)

LIBRARIAN: Do you have a library card? (*searching, closed question*)

PATRON: No

LIBRARIAN: Well, you need to have a library card to use the computers(*instructing*). Do you have a photo id with you today? (*searching, closed question*)

PATRON: Yes.

LIBRARIAN: OK. Then you can just fill out this form (*hands him paper, patron sits*) and take it to the circulation desk and they will make you a card(*instructing*).

PATRON: And then I can use the computers?

LIBRARIAN: Yes.

PATRON: OK. (*patron fills out form, stands up to leave*) Thanks.

LIBRARIAN: You're welcome.

PATRON: (*patron goes to circulation desk, returns a few minutes later*) Here, I think I stole your pen!

LIBRARIAN: (*laughs*) Oh no problem. Thanks! (*patron heads over to computers*) (*approachability*)

This was probably both the longest and most complex interaction I observed, and as you can see, it was not very difficult to resolve! All of the questions were straightforward, simple, and did not require probing open-ended questions, nor follow-up questions. The librarians handled each interaction in a helpful, courteous, and pleasant manner. They did not act like they were being interrupted or "put out" by requests. One of the patrons was hard of hearing and the librarians were patient in repeating their responses a little louder for him. The librarians usually stayed seated behind their desk except when a patron asked for help locating a book on a shelf. In that case, Lucy got up and went to the stacks with her to successfully locate the book. The librarian's position behind the desk may have decreased their approachability in some respects but it did provide a consistent location in which to find them versus the roving reference model.

Following the observation period, I spent about 20-30 minutes interviewing the reference librarians, Lucy and Melissa. I asked if they recorded reference questions and answers and they said that generally they do not, although if a particularly challenging question does come in, they might make a note of it. They are only required to keep statistics on how often they help with the internet and how often they deal with tax questions for the IRS. When I asked about their ready reference resources they immediately mentioned Google, the Hawaii State judiciary website, personal law forms, Juvenile Series and Sequels, and the IRS website. I noted a fairly current and well stocked print reference section with maps, atlases, phone books, newspapers, dictionaries, encyclopedia, Hawaiian reference, and college and job search sources, but the librarians said the section is not used much. I asked them to describe the types of reference interactions they handle and Lucy estimated that 80% of their questions deal with computers/ internet, 10% are helping locate materials, and 5% are readers' advisory services. Lucy also indicated that they deal with a

fair amount of genealogical questions in house and refer more complex genealogical questions to

the main branch but did not quantify the number of those cases that they deal with. She said most

of the computer/internet questions are simple navigation questions like locating the browser,

accessing email, or printing from the computers. She said that the readers' advisory services are

directed primarily towards helping youth find series books or helping parents find appropriate

books for their children to read. I wondered at which point most users seek reference help and

Melissa and Lucy agreed that most patrons will have already begun the search process and don't

ask for help unless they get "stuck" finding something. Describing staffing, Lucy said KPL

employs two full time and one part time reference librarian on staff, plus herself. She tries to

come out to the reference for a couple of hours each day that she works. I asked what librarians

work on when they are not dealing directly with a reference question. Lucy said she handles

branch management issues or browses the computer for current events that might guide her in

display themes. Melissa said that she processes books and verifies library card applications. Lucy

explained that Jack, the "tech guy" at KPL, often reads up on technology news that might impact

the library. Lucy and Melissa both admitted that the traffic was particularly "slow" that day, and

they superstitiously refrained from saying the "s" word in order to prevent the rest of the day

from becoming hectic. When I pointed out that this was spring break for the school system they

acknowledged that a school holiday would explain the lighter than normal traffic.

Thoughts and Interpretations

       While the vision and mission statements of HSPLS communicate the desire and goal to

be an integral member of the community and provide both traditional and innovative services, I

did not see much evidence of that during my observation. KPL seems to be clinging to its

traditional roles and definitions of what a library *was* instead of focusing on what a library *could be*. Scott (2011) points out that much of the public still sees libraries as book repositories and that the information profession needs to work to shift that perception. We must ask ourselves, what does service mean? Are we providing the most relevant services to our communities? Better service *to* the public translates into support *from* the public. Advocacy and greater support from the public could mean better protection from budget cuts. To be fair, KPL is part of a larger system and may not have flexibility to be more responsive to the community's needs. In my research, I identified three ways in which KPL could improve their service to the community: more access to technology, updated reference services, and a more inviting interior.

To better provide for the community's technology needs, I would recommend that KPL add more computers (they have about a dozen). Stein, Edge, Kelley, Hewlitt, &Trainer (2008) , Taylor, Jaeger, McDermott, Kodama, & Bertot (2012), and Norman (2012), all advocate for additional computer terminals and more digital materials in today's public libraries. Taylor, et al. (2012) assert that free services and training are what people need most from libraries when economic times are tough. Norman (2012), describes how in a poor economy, libraries are critical in bridging the digital divide for those who cannot afford or do not have the technical skills necessary to compete in today's work force. Lucy admitted that Jack is really the only librarian at KPL adept at handling tech concerns and that often patrons will approach the desk and if they see that Jack is not working, they will just turn and walk away. Since technology is such a vital part of current information services, I think all KPL staff needs to be trained to use and assist with tech services. Therefore, KPL's first response to community needs should be

more work stations, up to date digital resources, and the assistance of well trained staff to help

bridge the digital divide.

Cassell & Hiremath (2012) and Zabel (Trends…Part 1, 2005) remarked on the changing

face of reference services over the past decade or so. The total number of reference interactions

is decreasing, but questions are more complex. Google savvy users conduct reference searches

on their own and consult librarians when they get stuck or when they need to evaluate sources.

What remains is recognition within the information professions of a need to bring structure and

order to digital content and information chaos. Agosto, Rozaklis, MacDonald, and Abels (2011)

and Norman (2012), propose that we should think about reference service more in terms of

helping evaluate content and aggregating/collecting resources. Therefore, reference services will

probably not disappear but they more likely will be part of a collaborative process. Additionally,

since the reference questions may not always come to us, librarians need to be proactive in

seeking out those interactions by updated methods. Phillips (2014) describes a new roving

reference model with librarians walking around with Ipads and seeking out patron interactions.

KPL utilizes no roving reference service. Circulation and reference librarians stay behind their

counters or desks and wait for questions to come to them. KPL offers in person, phone, and

email "ask a librarian" service but does not have text or chat capability. Zabel (Trends…Part 1,

2005), Stein, et al. (2008), and Chow and Croxton (2012) suggest the following to spruce up

reference services: change staffing loads on the basis of observations of traffic patterns, integrate

the reference desk with other services (e.g. combining circulation and reference), recruit

reference help from other areas (part time, volunteer, other staff), employ chat or IM reference

services, and provide Web self-help (through better tutorials on library home page). Zabel

(Trends…Part 2, 2005) reminds us that as the worldwide economy slows, there will be less

money for schools and libraries and increased scrutiny of how tax dollars are spent. During my

observations, it was clear that KPL is experiencing a decrease in reference interactions and I

wonder whether a small library budget is best served by staffing two reference librarians. Would

offering the options above be a better use of resources? Reference services that have remained

strong for KPL are Readers' Advisory (RA) services and genealogical services. Stover (2005)

posits that RA services in small libraries help librarians connect with patrons in a time when

person to person interactions are decreasing. Not only can RA potentially foster good feelings

about libraries in general but positive RA experiences might make patrons more comfortable to

approach staff for other needs. This indicates that KPL's reference model should be updated and

that some resources and energy could safely be funneled towards RA and genealogical services.

The final area in which I thought KPL could improve is in the layout and design of the

interior. Zabel (Trends…Part 2, 2005) points out that shrinking budgets might lead libraries to

cut hours or resources but we should be trying to make the library seem like the place "to be."

The public, especially the "millennials" need to be enticed into libraries by creating inviting

spaces that are places for community, teaching, learning, research, and fun. Stein, et al. (2008)

make some recommendations for quality improvements to public libraries: develop a more open

look to the first floor, use a more captivating and clear signage system, and have more space for

special events. Jordan (2005) explained that another part of making libraries inviting is the

"friendliness factor." Friendly service and reaching out to communities will help the public

realize why libraries are so important. So how does KPL measure up? During my observations,

the reference staff was welcoming and they seemed to interact with the patrons with friendliness.

They seemed responsive to community news by setting up displays dealing with current events.

However the demeanor of the circulation staff could use improvement. When I visit the library with my family, we are rarely greeted by staff and have experienced curt interactions at the circulation desk. The facility, the furniture, and the décor are dated and uncomfortable although there is slightly more comfortable seating in the Quiet Zone (see Appendix A). I do not feel that I want to "hang out" there. KPL's physical space is limited, so providing meeting or conference space is perhaps not feasible but might be done on a smaller scale. Some special events could be held outdoors in our usually lovely Hawaii weather. The Kailua Fact Sheet (2012) did indicate some attempts at bringing the community and the library together like a Lion Dance performance, a string quartet concert, and story time with Uncle Wally Amos all hosted by KPL. The library also participated in the Kailua 4th of July parade and ran a booth at the Kailua Town Party. KPL could certainly benefit from an interior facelift and from more involvement and outreach in the community.

Norman (2012) predicts that public libraries will endure provided they change their role to suit the communities in which they reside. Some of the focus will have to shift away from books and move towards deliberately making connections with the community. My impression of KPL is that it is trying to serve the community needs in small ways but that it could do more. However, not knowing more about their budgetary constraints and freedom to create and implement programs, it is possible that KPL is doing all that it can with its available resources.

Conclusion

If I were to replicate this project, I would spend less time observing reference interactions and more on asking questions about the strategies the HSPLS and/or KPL have in place to respond to the needs of the Kailua community. I would inquire about plans to improve access to

technology, reference services, and/or capital improvements. I would ask more probative questions about the budget: how much funding goes to staff; to reference, print, or digital material; to community programs? I would ask about the kinds of training that are available to staff, and what types of workshops are offered to the public. I am curious about the type of community outreach that KPL is providing and whether or not HSPLS is seeking out partnerships with businesses in the community.

As a librarian professional in training, I feel that this field experience has helped me be a more critical observer and advocate for the role that libraries should play in our communities. My vision of what a library *should* be started out somewhat different than what the library *needs to be* in order to remain a relevant piece of society. I admit I have a lot of nostalgia for print material that does not align with the current trends in information formats of today. I, too, cling to the traditional version of library and reference services. To those like me, Scott (Strategies…, 2011) might caution that we need to make libraries important not just to *some* of society but to *most* of society. In order for public libraries to thrive, they need to be responsive to community needs, get the word out to non-users, form partnerships with community businesses, get out of library building, embrace change, and take risks. If information professionals can make a community see how important their public library is to their lives, the public will support and vote for it in tough times, ensuring that the public library will endure for many more generations.

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Appendix A: Map of Kailua Public Library

Kailua Public Library

Entrance

Juvenile Section

Quiet Zone

Print Reference

Cubicle seating

Reference Desk

CDs and DVDs

Circulation area

OPAC kiosk

Internet terminals

Adult Fiction and Non-Fiction

Tables

Young Adult

Entrance