

February 2013

## Op Ed-Random Ramblings: Is a Theory of Collection Development Possible?

Bob Holley

Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Holley, Bob (2013) "Op Ed-Random Ramblings: Is a Theory of Collection Development Possible?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6415>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

## Op Ed — Random Ramblings

### Is a Theory of Collection Development Possible?

Column Editor: **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 248-547-0306; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

I admit to being a very practical person who doesn't pay much attention to theory in my daily life. The interesting part is that I often come to the same conclusions as people who do. One of my favorite colleagues is **Dr. Dian Walster**, who is my exact opposite on this question but whose actions are similar. We often discuss effective teaching. During one of our discussions, I discovered that I practiced reflective learning in a similar fashion to how Monsieur Jourdain in **Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*** learned to his amazement that he spoke prose. She may have learned about this technique from her interest in theoretical pedagogy, while I implemented it from my thinking about how to teach effectively, past experience as a student, and trial and error.

The role of theory in librarianship in general is a tricky issue, as it is in the social sciences in general. To me, the best proof of the difficulty of forming an accurate, predictive theory is the stock market. Anyone who could solve this problem would get filthy rich. While researchers can draw statistically valid conclusions about the present, their results then modify future activities and undermine these very theories. In addition, these theories depend upon assumptions that can change and upon the researchers' views of human nature, where irrationality is often more important than the traditionally assumed rationality of economic decisions. The only valid permanent assumption may be human greed. In the end, the best minds grapple with this problem and come up with different conclusions. The stock market expert with a long string of successes may suddenly have a phenomenal failure. In the end, research has shown that throwing darts at a list of stocks often comes up with statistically similar results to the picks of the most sophisticated stock market analysts. (<http://www.avidtrader.com/2013/01/the-handoff/>)

Furthermore, social science theory is most often a distillation of practice. The researcher analyzes what happens and then comes up with a theory to explain the results. I frequently ask potential hires how long they think that their research will remain valid because theory needs to change as often as practice does. I used to subscribe to an Internet bulletin on Web design that recommended constantly changing features and revising the site after testing the current and the proposed change simultaneously to see

which version produced more revenue. This bulletin didn't even attempt to explain why some things worked better than others beyond a certain number of core principles. Instead, they advocated continuous experimentation.

To focus specifically on collection development, many of the key assumptions of the past are no longer true. Digital coexists with print. The window of easy availability of materials is no longer the brief time when they were in-print and sold by the publisher. The library is no longer limited to providing physical access. An abundance of information has replaced scarcity as the key issue for users. Digital information resources are not static. Libraries are no longer judged by the size of their print collections but by their ability to deliver quickly-needed information to their user communities. A small library can have access to vast quantities of digital resources. I could continue, but I'll stop here.

All these changes, which have happened in less than two decades, challenge the former theories of collection development from the print age. Libraries are establishing new practices to deal with the changing environments. Patron-driven acquisitions has replaced buying materials for future users. Libraries are removing print materials on the assumption of the reliability of digital access. Collections no longer need to be balanced if the libraries' users don't value this balance. The role of the collection development specialist has been radically diminished. Libraries are buying large quantities of materials as packages for economies of scale. (This change, however, resembles the purchase of major microform sets where many of the items were never used and where some were almost useless for scholarly research.)

I would contend that the full implications of these changes are not yet known. Many rely on the assumption that most materials will remain accessible somewhere either digitally or in print or that those materials that disappear weren't worth saving, at least for today's scholars. Research is underway to study the results of these changes, but conclusions

as firm as those about print collections before the arrival of the Internet have not yet had enough time to be developed.

Collection development requires a period of relative stability before accurate general theories can begin to emerge. The "new normal" may eventually arrive, but we're not there yet. Users haven't caught up with the changes either and may not have modified their habits to reflect the new realities of scholarly communication and library use. Conscious or subconscious attitudes may contaminate the theorizing of older collection development experts like me. I don't know what waits around the temporal corner, and I doubt that many others do. This concept is important because one of the best ways to test a theory is to judge its predictive value. Perhaps we're not even yet asking the right questions.

Overall, I believe that much practical research must occur to test the results of the changes in collection development, but doing so is always difficult. Some areas will be easier than others. If the university press that digitizes its complete back list significantly increases its revenues over a press that doesn't, the market has spoken; or perhaps, for an alternate explanation, this press happened to have a strong back list. More difficult to prove, for example, will be the premise that scholars won't find needed links for their research because the resource is no longer easily available from browsing the print collection. A few pieces of anecdotal evidence don't prove much one way or the other. In some ways, libraries didn't do very well in getting the right information to users in the past, and perhaps they won't do much better in the future. A much more significant body of practical research will be required before the meta-analysis can take place to create new theories of collection development.

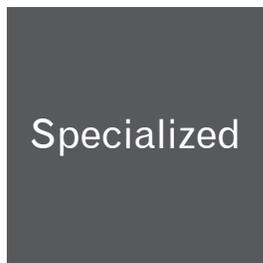
Another issue is that research that most believe to be valid is often not applied. Having a gun does not protect the owner but increases the risk of violence. Students would learn more if classes started later, but this schedule change would conflict with sports. I see the

*continued on page 35*



# The Leading eBook Platform for Health Science Collections. Stop Searching. Start Finding.

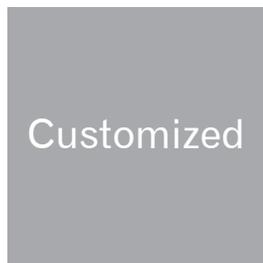
The R2 Digital Library is a market-leading eBook platform for health science collections featuring a comprehensive selection of medical, nursing and allied health eBooks with an intuitive interface optimized for your library.



Wide selection from leading STM publishers

Extensive selection of Doody's® Core Titles

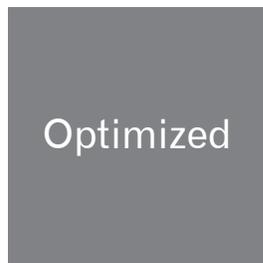
High yield and focused resources



Purchase only the resources you need

Access titles for the life of the edition

Suitable for collections of all sizes and specialties



Integrated drug information

Extensive image library

Enhanced discoverability

Clean, intuitive interface



If you haven't seen the R2 Digital Library lately, don't wait. Visit us today at [www.r2library.com](http://www.r2library.com).

800-345-6425  
Rittenhouse.com  
R2Library.com

Rittenhouse  
BOOK DISTRIBUTORS

DISTRIBUTING THE LEADING SCIENTIFIC, TECHNICAL AND MEDICAL PUBLISHERS

R2 DIGITAL  
LIBRARY



511 Feheley Drive | King of Prussia, PA 19406

## Op Ed — Random Ramblings from page 34

same possibilities of rejection for library research that is counter to core values/prejudices of librarianship or to the operational wishes of library administrators. The library press, blogs, and discussion lists trumpet research in support of libraries but somehow seek to find ways to show why research on a diminished value for libraries isn't valid.

I came very close to giving this column the subtitle: "Ross Atkinson, Where Art Thou?" **Ross Atkinson**, who died suddenly in 2006 at the age of 60, was the collection development theorist of my generation. His last published paper in *Library Literature Online*

was "Six Key Challenges for the Future of Collection Development." He was grappling to integrate the changes brought about by the digital revolution. I wish that he were still alive to continue this work since I'm not aware of any other theorist of his stature who is publishing today.

My concluding point returns to the thought of placing theory within the framework of completing everyday tasks. I thought **Ross** was brilliant and relished reading each new article. I wouldn't, however, have assigned his work to my collection development students because many of them would not have had the background or contextual knowledge to understand his reasoning and conclusions. Similarly, many librarians in the print age were skilled at collection development with-

out having read his theories and not even knowing that he existed. His theoretical ideas filtered down to more practical writers like me and thereby improved the practice of collection development. The idea that I pick up tomorrow in *The Wall Street Journal* may contain the essential lessons of a highly complex management study though simplified enough to be put into practice by the average manager. On the other hand, the same idea might also come from a hard-working boss who discovered the concept by evaluating what worked and didn't work on the job. Both approaches have their validity. The best case is when they both reach similar conclusions since this fact increases the probability of accuracy, at least for a little while before the next major change. 🌱

## Rumors from page 31

involved with the management and dissemination of information in all aspects of print and electronic content, within the academic, corporate, research, government, medical and public library market segments. **LM Delivery Group's** CEO is **Janne Järvinen**. **Susan Wolper** will continue to lead the U.S. organization as President and CEO of **Wolper Information Services**. <http://www.wolper.com>

**Chuck Hamaker**, the wonder man — sent me this information. The sparkling **David Stern** who is Associate Dean for Public Services at **Illinois State University** has a new book coming out — *How*

**Libraries Make Tough Choices in Difficult Times: Purposeful Abandonment**. Coming in the spring of 2013 from **Chandos Publishing**.

Last issue, we told y'all about **Margie Hlava** <mhlava@accessinn.com> and the Albuquerque Business First Award. After her spectacular appearance in the Find/Search panel in **32 Charleston**, we invited her to Singapore for the **15th Fiesole Retreat**. Unfortunately, **Margie** had to decline. Why? She was planning her other's 90th birthday party!

In my library, I oversee the federal and state depository library programs. So — I try to follow news from the **GPO** — was reading **NewsBreaks (Information Today)** February 21, 2013, "GPO's mission is validated by an independent study" by the awesome **Miriam Drake**. Y'all may remember when

**Miriam** was one of the keynote speakers at the **1992 Charleston Conference** on adding value as librarians. **Miriam**, who is professor Emerita of the **Georgia Institute of Technology**, outlines the latest study, "Rebooting the Government Printing Office: Keeping America Informed in the Digital Age." The study was performed by the **National Association of Public Administration**. Speaking of which, we need to get **Miriam** back to Charleston!

Related — Just got notice that the **U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO)** is modernizing and streamlining Web services in support of the **Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)**. As a result, the **FDLP listserv** known as **FDLP-L**, is being discontinued. After March 15, 2013, announcements

*continued on page 47*