

Roots and Branches: YA Services Past, Present and Future

The First YALSA Past President's Lecture

By Mary K. Chelton

Since I suggested two other people for this lecture, I'm finding it ironic that I am giving it, even more so because I am offering these insights from across the great divide between practitioner and library school professor. When I was a practitioner I always thought library school professors were, if not out of touch, then downright strange. Worse still, given my age, I'm sure that many attendees are interested in the fact that I'm still alive. As if these were not hurdles enough, I am the proud possessor of a Jitterbug cell phone without texting enabled, thought that wifi and wii were the same thing for at least 3 years, deleted my Facebook account about two months after I started it, and find most graphic novels about as interesting as I once found Russian ones. In YA terms, I am obviously not the participant observer type of anthropologist, but observer and anthropologist I am, and it is from that vantage point that the following observations are made.

When Anne Carroll Moore, the famous children's services coordinator at New York Public Library hired Mabel Williams in 1917 to start work with schools, she was not only acknowledging a societal shift toward more formal education for adolescents, but also the need to create a "way station" for her clients who were aging out of children's services, but who were often not yet well-served by the library's adult services units. This remains an unstated but important goal of this specialty to this day. I should point out that, with 2017 just 6 years away, YA services are coming up on 100 years old, although library historians might argue for even earlier dates. (Bernier, Chelton, Jenkins & Pierce, 2005)

High school was not compulsory at that time; most adolescents went to work after 8th grade, and information came mostly in printed books. Williams went on to establish NYPL's Office of Work with Young Adults and in 1929, first issued *Books for the Teenage* (then called *Books for Young People*), which is now a totally online publication aptly called *Stuff for the Teenage*, which better represents the multimedia nature of current YA

collections. (Campbell, 1998; <http://www.nypl.org/help/getting-oriented/resources-teens/sta>)

Since the days of Moore and Williams, much has changed inside and outside libraries. Schooling is now legally mandated for adolescents through age 16 or 18 in most states, although employment prospects are dim for high school graduates and worse still for dropouts (*Infoplease* 2010; Bloom & Haskins, 2010) . School librarians are usually mandated in secondary schools, although their influence on student academic achievement has yet to reach all politicians and taxpayers, despite all the research showing that relationship. Following the lead of New York Public Library, many public libraries established young adult departments and collections separate from children's, although separate staffing of YA positions did not always follow suit (Johnson, 1940). The staffing issue has followed YA services into the current trend of improving or creating YA spaces. However, the implication often seems to be that space and service are the same. I was pleased to see that the Teen Spaces Statement on the YALSA Board agenda has an extended section on staffing.

Another issue with YA spaces is the prohibition on use of the space by other ages, at a time when age-segregation is widely viewed as problem for adolescents in our culture. One of the recognized benefits of public library space has been that it has allowed people of different ages to share the same space, albeit with tension at times. The question now is how to preserve that reality and support spatial equity for young adults at the same time.

Young Adults Are Not Generic

One thing worth noting which has not changed is that many YAs today are also immigrants or the children of immigrants, just like they were in Mabel Williams' time. She was dealing with the huge influx of European immigrants in the early part of the 20th Century much as we are now with Asian and Latino teens. This is both a demographic and political reality for YA services because, except for the most homogeneous suburban or rural communities, the ethnic and racial diversity of the youth population is much more pronounced than in the overall population at large, and the senior population in particular. By 2020, the projected number of

people over 65 will equal those people under 18 (Changing Balance).

These demographic realities beg for culturally competent service and culturally authentic materials, the political will to advocate for young people in the face of hostility or indifference on the part of the senior population, which is starting to include the retiring baby boomers, and a strong push for intergenerational alliances. Making old people know and love teenagers should become an overt and covert goal of all YA services providers in the decade ahead, or generational competition for resources, predictably exploited by politicians and the media, will effectively kill or starve services for adolescents across the board at all levels of government.

YA services have historically, until recently, treated young adults as a sort of US cultural generic group, with more things in common than different, except for what I call gross differences: avid vs. reluctant reader; male vs. female; tweens vs. older teens; graphic novel readers vs. regular book readers, rural vs. urban, etc., Arguments over the increased multicultural diversity, both ethnic

and racial, of the US adolescent population, have usually centered on materials: authenticity of content, author, audience, etc., when time could better be spent discussing the information needs of newly arrived and first generation immigrant teens. What does culturally competent YA services mean for them? Many of these teens are the library users and translators for entire families while coping with dual identity issues themselves at home and at school; yet, there has been little work done researching them by LIS. As Bradley Pilon, a school psychologist in the Los Angeles Unified School District, puts it:

Immigrant teenagers face adjustments that magnify the struggles of adolescence. In addition to normal adolescent rebellion, culture shock, a new language, and a different educational system compound the challenge of starting life in the United States. The situation is further complicated because in many cases the immigrant parents are unfamiliar with this country's schools and American culture in general. In addition, many

parents are recently re-united with children they have not seen for years. These parents are highly motivated to re-establish influence over their children and thereby guide them toward the better life they believe this country holds for them.

(Pilon, 2004).

It would seem long overdue for national library attention to these kids' "information needs." I perused YALSA's online course offerings and found only one course, "Beyond Booklists," that seems to address these issues. While I realize that attention to diversity is probably embedded in many individual YALSA activities, (certainly the recently completed YA Literature Symposium, "Beyond Good Intentions," is a good example), there needs to be a better YALSA continuous focal point, possibly analagous to ACRL's Instruction for Diverse Populations Committee, but more active in terms of programs, workshops and articles. The defeat of The Dream Act nationally does not preclude attention to these and other immigrant and/or ethnic and racial minority teens by other organizations, and should it come up for

another vote, it would be nice to see more ALA support spearheaded by YALSA.

YA Services Are Not Generic: School and Public Libraries

Since the time of Mabel Williams, school and public libraries have both been considered part of young adult services, although that term is more often associated with public libraries. Since the two types of libraries share the adolescent audience, they are considered natural allies, and if nothing else, schools allow access to young adults by public librarians for library and reading promotional activities. This was all fine as long as collections consisted only of printed books, but in reality, with information technology playing a larger part in instruction, a divergence is taking place. The audience may be the same; some of the goals, such as “Reading is a window to the world” from the “common beliefs” section, or the “Demonstrate motivation by seeking information to answer personal questions and interests...” under “Learners Use Skills, Resources, & Tools to Pursue Personal and Aesthetic Growth” section of AASL’s *Standards for the 21st*

Century Learner, are the same, but increasingly, school library attention is devoted to information literacy instruction, formal learning techniques to promote inquiry learning and assessment (AASL, 2007). School librarians also try to emphasize the relationship of school libraries to student achievement and the fact that they are teachers first. Many prefer being called “Teacher-Librarian” to make the point to colleagues and administrators. Much of the learning is accomplished through what Melissa Gross has called “imposed queries,” and much of the research presents students as people with deficits who can’t search information technology with any skill, or who plagiarize as needed (Gross, 2001; Bernier, 2007).

The public library version of YA services, which still paying attention to homework-related school requests because they make up such a large part of reference work, seems to be moving much more toward voluntary self-actualization,--in other words, providing materials, services, and experiences that enhance informal learning, entertainment, and personal, (as opposed to

curricular) interests. While the case can always be made that services in both types of libraries are two sides of the same coin, I don't know many public YA librarians who consider themselves teachers in any formal instructional sense; whereas, school librarians do so as both a credentialing and survival process. Given current budget realities in schools, if you're not "instructional staff," you are ripe for budget cutting.

Since Mike Printz was the best YA librarian I ever knew, bar none, I hesitate to say that the divergence in emphasis should probably be noted, rather than obscured in professional development activities. I am not suggesting ignorance of what each other does, just that we stop pretending that, because we are serving adolescents in both places that we're doing the same things. Even when we are doing the same things, it is often for vastly different reasons, sort of like the difference between reading for pleasure and reading for comprehension.

Intellectual Freedom

Another historical difference between school and public library YA services is intellectual freedom, not only because of the contentious politics of education, but also because of the legal responsibility of “in loco parentis,” which the schools have to abide by, and the public library does not (U.S. Constitution Online). Over and above whether “in loco parentis” is seen by school librarians and/or administrators as a license to censor, the bottom line is that schools do not have the “out” that public libraries do in being able to say that they serve all ages. Also, the insistence by school librarians that they be viewed as instructional staff undermines their claim that school libraries serve as “a point of voluntary access to information and ideas...” as stated in ALA’s Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights for school library media programs.

Unfortunately, new formats have resurrected issues of intellectual freedom in public libraries, despite a long and exceptionally well-documented history of intellectual freedom activity in ALA since the Library Bill of Rights was adopted in 1939, and “age” was added in 1967, namely graphic novels. The

listserv discussions about graphic novels and YA collections leave me wondering if many new YA librarians have any knowledge of ALA's and YALSA's IF history and commitments, with all the concerns about "appropriateness" for YA collections, without any reference to an IF context. This concern is particularly interesting because not one of the top ten challenged books for 2007 to 2009 reported on the OIF part of the ALA website is a graphic novel!

I am aware that librarians in general are a risk-averse group. Nobody ever writes an essay for library school saying they want to fall on the sword for the First Amendment and the Right to Read. (It would be refreshing if they did, but they then might alarm library school faculty on admissions committees with their oddity.) Nobody wants to be fired in this or any other economy, but this caution without context makes me wonder if the problem is really intellectual freedom or whether the larger issue is that a fair number of direct service YA librarians are confused about their primary clients, who should be young adults. I am not suggesting political naivete about deflecting or combating IF challenges, but focus. If these librarians spent more time thinking about why many

kids loved graphic novels so they could better explain this appeal to dubious adults, and less time worrying about the specter of possibly mythical censors, they might do a better job of serving young adults. I am not the first person in YALSA to point out the YA services are a risky business (Braun, 2010), but it appears that some of us need frequent reminders. Since I'm the one who established the Intellectual Freedom Committee in YASD (now YALSA) which has now morphed into a division round table, I suggest some programmatic attention to this issue.

Another IF problem is that the 12-18 operational definition of young adults includes tweens as well as teens, and there is a fair amount of anecdotal evidence that many librarians and adults would like some sort of distinction made between materials better suited for tweens than teens. This issue is not helped by rampant inconsistency in publisher and reviewer age designations in catalogs and reviews, as one of my research students has eloquently pointed out recently, nor by the increased maturity and complexity of materials for, and of interest to, young adults. If you remember, this was also the source of controversy when YALSA

once (only once?) compiled a list of recommended websites some years back that included Columbia University's Go Ask Alice health question and answer site (<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/>). This was an appropriate choice, since many young adults shared curiosity over the same things that Columbia college students did. The fact that this site included information deemed inappropriate for 12-year-olds (by YALSA's age definition of young adults) brought none other than Dr. Laura down on ALA's back and drove everyone crazy for a while, especially public library directors who had to explain this action to local incensed Dr. Laura fans. (I had the misfortune of lunching with one of them in Utah once.) I think it is long overdue that we address this issue from both a developmental as well as an intellectual freedom perspective. Are tweens young adults or not? How do we make it clear that an item in young adult collections or labeled for YAs in general collections may not appeal to, or be approved of, for every young adult?

YA Collections

If hiring Mabel Williams in 1917 is taken as a start date, YA services is coming up on its 100-year anniversary, and it should be obvious by now that young adults are not only a mobile device and online generation, but also a multimedia-consuming generation. (Blair & Fisher, 2010) The PEW Trust has published a research study just about every year since 2000 about kids and technology (PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2000-2011). Collections for young adults should reflect this multimedia use, and YALSA should recognize this and expand the division's award structure. Why isn't there a "best game(s)" list or award, for example? What did happen to the best website list? Shouldn't there be a best online reference sources list developed with RUSA? What is everyone doing or going to do about ebooks? The all-print era of Mabel Williams is dead, and the non-book and electronic materials of interest to young adults should get better national recognition.

The Future

Last of all, but not least, I need to point out that one of the big current movements in the LIS and health fields is evidence-

based practice. So far, it is confined to medical and academic libraries, but it has relevance for young adult services in terms of what academics research and what practitioners learn from it (Anton, 2004). Beyond the occasional bibliography of research articles in YALS and the YALSA award to researchers for small-scale projects, it may be time to initiate an annual funded, prestigious YA research award to encourage and call attention to outstanding research about adolescents and services for them relevant to what we do. I also do not think such an award should be confined only to LIS researchers, since there are academics and practitioners in many fields doing work relevant to YA services interests, and the LIS field is already too parochial. In much the same way that YALSA has professionalized and become solvent and thriving under Beth Yoke's tutelage and a succession of good recent officers—a long cry from the 70s when we were not even sure the division could survive on its own, let alone thrive,—practice needs to become much more evidence-based. Sharing on lists, wikis and social networks is fine, but all of these can often just reinforce traditional, customary ways of looking at the world,

without any evidence at all of value or outcome. Also, the existence of research spawns new research and sometimes brilliant research critiques, such as Anthony Bernier's wonderful "Not Broken by Someone Else's Schedule: On Joy and Young Adult Information-Seeking," which is the introduction to one of the youth information seeking books that Colleen Cool and I edited for Scarecrow Press (2007).

I hope you have enjoyed my meditation on YA Services, past and present. Despite an obvious rhetorical cast, everything I've talked about is documented, except for as-yet hypothetical suggestions. I encourage further discussion, rebuttals, corrections, etc.—anything to keep the conversation going. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to initiate this lecture series.

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