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The What and Why of Risk Taking in Teen Services

The word “risk” refers, often rather vaguely, to situations in which it is possible but not certain that some undesirable event will occur.

“Risk,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

That definition states very succinctly what makes the idea of taking risks frightening to many librarians. It’s not easy to make a decision if that decision will lead to something unpleasant. Everyone prefers to make decisions that are certain to bring good consequences. For example, it’s fairly easy to decide to help a teacher collect resources for an upcoming unit; the risks in doing that are most likely pretty minuscule. But it’s more difficult perhaps to decide to have a conversation with teens in the library about decisions related to smoking, drinking, or sex. Those discussions can be pretty risky, as a teen librarian could worry that a parent, or administrator, would hear of the discussion and question its value within the library setting.

When working with teens in a library, however, risk is a natural and important part of the job. A librarian who doesn’t take on the challenge of risk taking in teen services could very well not be serving the teen

population successfully. As YALSA past president Michael Cart said in an interview about risk in teen services, “I think anybody who elects YA librarianship as a profession is demonstrating risky behavior.”

An Interview with Michael Cart

Q. What did Risky Business for young adult librarians look like ten years ago?

A. It wasn’t a pretty picture! In fact, I chose “Risky Business” as the theme for my 1997–98 YALSA presidential year to focus attention and action on redeeming young adults, young adult literature, and the profession of young adult librarianship from the risks that then threatened to overwhelm them. In articulating these risks in my first presidential message, I quoted then teen activist Danny Seo who, in his book *Generation React*, had written, “Have you noticed? Our generation faces problems that didn’t exist when our parents were our age. So it’s not surprising that many of us feel hopeless about the future.” Some of us in the profession were also feeling a bit hopeless about serving the growing needs of teens, since no more than 11 percent of America’s libraries then employed a young adult librarian. As for the literature, it had been pronounced “near death” as early as 1994 when YALSA held a preconference to examine the health and prospects for the future of this still young genre that seemed to be in imminent danger of extinction.¹

Q. How do you think it’s changed since? What does risk look like now?

A. The situation has changed dramatically for the better, especially for YA literature and YA librarianship. The literature, for the past ten years, has been enjoying a new golden age that shows every indication of continuing for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile YALSA became the fastest-growing division in ALA, while 51.9 percent of America’s libraries now report having at least one full-time librarian devoted to providing young adult service, and teens seem to be taking advantage of this happy circumstance. In

a recent Harris Interactive poll, four out of five teens reported being library users. Unfortunately, the teens themselves continue to lead lives that are no strangers to risk. According to the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, the main threats to adolescents' health are the risky behaviors they themselves choose. Lynn Ponton, author of *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do*, explains, "Adolescents define themselves through rebellion and anger at parents or other adults, engaging in high risk behaviors . . ." Happily, the incidence of many of these risky behaviors seems to be showing a gradual decrease.²

Q. What was the biggest risk you've taken as a young adult librarian?

A. Alas, I was never a young adult librarian; my professional career was spent as a library administrator who was an advocate for youth and youth services, and that's what led me to my involvement with YALSA and, subsequently, with young adult literature. It's my career as a writer and editor that has invited me to take risks, particularly as one who believes we must trust YAs with the truth, no matter how hard-edged. That's why I've tried to be an advocate for unsparing realism in YA literature. I've tried to be true to this in my own books, especially *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth* and *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity*, both of which push the envelope in terms of the frankness of their sexual content.

Q. Have you heard of any risks from young adult librarians that made you raise an eyebrow?

A. I think anybody who elects YA librarianship as a profession is demonstrating risky behavior. The sad truth is that too many people continue to dislike and distrust teens and, by extension, those who advocate for them. After I retired in 1991, I spent some years consulting with libraries and library systems on YA service and the single most common problem I was asked to address was staff reluctance to deal with YAs.

Q. How are libraries aligning themselves to meet the risky needs of the teens who use them?

A. Following YALSA's lead, I would hope they are focusing on the needs and competencies of YAs instead of only their specific problems. They are also now routinely involving teens in every aspect of service and programming, from planning to execution. They are also developing new collections in new forms, formats, and technologies that change with the needs and habits of YAs. And, I would hope, they are embracing flexibility and being open to new ways of serving the always new needs of their teen populations. As YALSA's recently launched examination of service to older YAs in the later teens and early twenties suggests, libraries are also willing to redefine their service populations to conform with societal realities.

Q. How has risky business in young adult literature changed? What authors are taking the biggest risks now as opposed to ten years ago?

A. What a good question. For starters, the literature is much more mature and sophisticated in its content than it was a decade or so ago. And I'm not only speaking of a new candor in addressing previously taboo subjects such as sexual abuse, incest, and other edgy topics, but also a new willingness to embrace innovative narrative forms, experimental literary techniques, and character-driven (instead of plot-driven) content. Today's writers are showing a salutary willingness to trust their readers by challenging them with both topics and techniques. Four writers who I think best exemplify this kind of risk taking are M. T. Anderson, Adam Rapp, Philip Pullman, and Aidan Chambers.

Q. What advice would you give young adult librarians and library students who are taking or are about to take risks? What advice would you give their managers?

A. Talk with, not at, young adults. Be flexible, be fearless, and—believing in what you do—trust your instincts. As for managers: trust your staff and never forget that today's teens are tomorrow's community leaders and potential library advocates.

WHY TEEN SERVICES ARE AND SHOULD BE RISKY

That isn't to say that every risk a teen librarian might take is worth it. But it is important that teen librarians don't go into their work with an aversion to risk. Or that teen librarians don't go into the job thinking it's a nice, cozy, and safe line of work. Instead, teen librarians need to be open to the possibilities of risk and also know how to make good decisions about when to be risky—and when not to be.

WHO TEENS ARE

For many teens, every day is a risky proposition. There is risk in:

- standing up in front of class and presenting a project
- walking into a school social event or party outside of school
- getting up in the morning and deciding what to wear
- letting friends and family members know about sexual orientation
- talking about problems with friends, family, or other adults in the community

The Search Institute's Forty Developmental Assets (see appendix D) provide a good framework for what teens need to grow up successfully. Many of these assets point to the need for teens to learn how to take and manage risks to become successful adults. For example:

The *Boundaries and Expectations* asset includes the importance of *adult role models*. This speaks directly to the need of teens to have adults in their lives who can demonstrate smart and safe behaviors. Teens need to look at adults—say, a librarian—to see how to handle a situation that might be risky, and know how to react if confronted with a similar circumstance.

The *Positive Values* asset states that teens need to take responsibility for their own actions. This isn't something that teens naturally know how to do, although many adults think that it is. It can seem very risky to a teen to take responsibility for something

that didn't go as planned. Teens therefore need opportunities to practice taking responsibility for their actions. They can do that in a variety of ways connected with the library, including managing a library card account, helping to select materials for the collection, and completing tasks as a part of a teen advisory board project.

The *Social Competencies* asset discusses resistance skills and a teen's ability to resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. It can be very risky for a teen to go against the crowd and resist what others are doing and suggesting that she do. Libraries can help teens to gain this asset and learn how to manage associated risks by providing materials that show how to resist peer pressure and activities that provide opportunities to practice taking these kinds of risks within a safe, librarian-managed environment.

For some teens, the library may be the only place in which it's possible to access answers to questions about relationships with the same or the opposite sex. The library might be the only place a teen can go to learn about how to be safe when using social media. Or the library may be the only place where a teen feels comfortable being part of a project in which his ideas are valued. It's important to give teens opportunities to gain assets by giving them the chance to take the risks necessary to do so. (See chapter 8 for more information on teens as risk takers.)

TEEN LIBRARIANS AS ADVOCATES

The authors of the article "Teen Risk Behavior," published by The Ohio State University Extension, state,

As parents, mentors, and role models we are charged with helping teens navigate the complicated landscape of risks and their consequences. We must take this role seriously and make sure that they understand the impacts these behaviors can have on their life.³

Librarians definitely fall into that continuum of adults in the community that need to support teens in "navigating the complicated landscape of risk."

If a librarian working with teens is not able to help teens manage and learn about risks, is she really doing her job? What if a teen is trying to figure out how to tell his parents that he is gay? He goes to the library, hoping there is a novel about a teen like him. He wants to see how another teen managed this type of risk to figure out how he can move forward himself. If the library doesn't have any novels on the topic, what's the teen to do?

While members of the community might feel uncomfortable having materials related to sexual orientation in the collection, should they be the ones to decide what should and shouldn't be included? Do they understand the type of support teens need to make good decisions? Do they think that if a teen can read about sexual orientation in a library book, that they might have to answer a question a teen has about the "scary" topic? Is that a good reason not to provide teens what they need? Who gets to make that decision? It should be the teen librarian who is looking out for the needs of teens in the community first, while at the same time taking the risk and informing community members regularly about why materials are in the collection, how programs are organized, and when discussions are held. (See chapter 2 for information on building risk-worthy collections.)

ASSESSING THE RISK

Of course not all risks that a teen librarian might take to serve teens successfully are smart risks. And, sometimes, a risk might be worth taking, but the time isn't quite right to jump in and do it. It's therefore a good idea to consider these factors when deciding whether to take a risk:

Where does the risk come from? Is it an internal or external risk? In other words, does the risk come from the possibility of going up against the views and ideas of coworkers or administrators (an internal risk)? Is this something that might be risky within the larger community of parents, teachers, and other authority figures (an external risk)? If it's an internal risk, ask, will taking the risk make the working environment nearly impossible to exist in? If an external risk, what will the impact be on overall community support of the library? It's important

to consider where the balance falls when thinking about the value of the risk you might take against the internal discomfort or changes in library community support. If the risk might lead to short-term difficulties but long-term gains, then it could be a risk worth taking.

Who will benefit from the risk? Is the risk something that all teens in the community will benefit from or will it be more of a risk that supports the needs of a small group? Even if it's a small group of teens who gain from the risk taking, is their benefit so great that the risk could be seen as meeting a large need? Because teens are a teen librarian's primary audience, if the risk benefits a large or small group of that audience, the risk needs to be taken seriously. If teens benefit while adults might freak out, consider the value of standing up for the teens and at the same time helping educate adults about the importance of taking risks to serve teens effectively.

What are the benefits of the risk? Will the risk help teens to be healthy and grow up successfully? Will the risk help the library move into providing contemporary services to teens? Will the risk help the library better inform the community about what the library is about and aims to achieve within the community? This is an instance where long-term thinking and big-picture planning should definitely come into play. If the risk under consideration might put the library or the teen librarian in the forefront of a controversy in the community in the short-term, but in the long-term provide the library with greater opportunities for serving teens successfully, maybe it's worth taking. Don't just think about the benefits today, tomorrow, and next week. Think about what the benefits are in six months, a year, or five years, and how those benefits might be turned into even greater opportunities for taking risks and making changes for teens in the community.

What would be the outcome of not taking the risk? If the risk isn't taken, who would lose out? Will the library be seen as unsupportive to teens in the community? Will teens use other resources and venues to get the information, programming, and

services they need? As mentioned previously, remember that teens are the primary audience for library teen services. If not taking the risk means that they are not being served, is not taking that risk more risky than actually taking it? Don't be scared to take a risk if that fear is keeping teens from the best service the library can offer.

Along with considering these factors when determining whether to take a risk, it's also important to think about what to do to manage the risk once a decision is made. Here are some tips for managing risk:

Consider how to limit the risk: Maybe it's a good idea to start small and then build on the first small steps. For example, if implementing social media technology into programs and services is risky because of external concerns, then it might be smart to start with a limited scale project. This could be a project in which the librarian works with a small group of teens using a book service like Goodreads as a Web 2.0 platform for book discussion. As adults in the community see that the Web-based book discussion can be managed safely and successfully in the online social world, the project can be expanded to other social tools and with a larger group of teens.

Make sure to inform, educate, and communicate every step of the way: No matter what the risk is, make sure that all who might be concerned are kept up to date. Keeping something secret makes it seem like the risk is more risky than it actually might be. Being out in the open helps people understand that everything is under control and the project is well thought out.

PERCEIVED VS. ACTUAL RISKS

One thing that holds librarians back when considering risks in the workplace is a perceived sense of risk as opposed to a knowledge of what the actual risks are. For example, consider the librarian who thinks if she sponsors an anime club in the library, then her administration and

community members will be up in arms. Because some people see anime as not much more than watching Saturday morning cartoons, she worries she'll get flack for starting the program at the library.

But this is only a perception of the librarian. She hasn't asked anyone about it. She hasn't brought the idea to the library director. She hasn't talked to parents whom she knows. She hasn't done any research; it's just something she feels in her gut.

These perceived risks are often the result of fears—and it's important that librarians not be taken in by these fears. There is a fear of bringing up a new program or service to administration because an administrator might say “no,” and it's never pleasant to have an idea turned down. Or it could be frightening to bring the topic up because the administrator might ask questions that the librarian can't answer (which, of course, means it's important to do homework before presenting the idea to anyone). And it's scary to start something new that might not go as planned. The teens who promised to attend might not. The equipment for showing anime in the library meeting room might break. A parent might walk in while the program is going on and ask questions. It's true, any of these could take place. But how does the librarian know what the real risks of this program are without talking to people, doing research, and trying things out?

THE ONLY WAY TO BE INNOVATIVE IS THROUGH RISK TAKING

Often perceived risks, rather than actual risks, hinder librarians from serving teens as well as they should. In addition, focusing on perceived rather than actual risks also means librarians aren't as innovative in offering programs and services as they might be. But think about it. Isn't every new program or service a risky proposition? Of course, some are riskier than others, but whatever the innovation—starting a new book discussion group, changing the policy on the number of items a customer can check out at one time, creating a book review blog—change can be risky because it's not clear exactly what the outcome will be.

For some new programs and services, it's easy to take a chance. There might be a lot of teens asking for the new activity, so starting it is easily justifiable. Perhaps the library director says this is something we have

to do, so it gets done. Those are situations that can be seen as very safe risk taking. But what about those times when it's not clear that starting something new is going to be successful or supported by the community and the library administration? That's when it's easy to make excuses to avoid taking a risk. But again, if the risk isn't taken, are teens being served successfully?

Imagine if a library provided the same services, programs, and collections to teens in 2010 as it did in 1950. Would that library really be meeting the needs of contemporary teens? And in the world of Web 2.0, handheld devices, and social networking, a library that doesn't take risks to support teens today is taking the chance that they won't be needed by teens of tomorrow. Perhaps in 1950 innovation and change could come slowly and risks could be minimized. But with all of the opportunities teens have today for finding information, connecting with others, and accessing fiction and nonfiction materials, the library that plays it safe risks losing its credibility and value in the community, and with teens specifically.

Wiktionary includes this definition of the term innovative: "Forward looking; ahead of current thinking." A librarian who is ahead of current thinking definitely needs to be risky. A librarian who serves teens successfully has to think ahead of everyone else to adequately prepare for the emerging needs of teens who live in a world filled with questions, physical and emotional change, and dynamic pop culture.

DON'T WORRY, BETA CAN HELP IN MANAGING RISKS

One of the attributes of the Web 2.0 culture is an understanding that a successful new product doesn't just drop from the sky. More and more businesspeople, educators, librarians, and others are realizing that to be successful, it's important to get feedback from users as a product or service is in development. Did you know that Google's Gmail service maintained a beta label for five years? That label helped users understand that it was a product under development and, as such, was going to change and grow over time. For librarians serving teens, it's possible to use this approach when taking risks in what the library offers.

Perhaps it's time to add urban lit to the library's teen collection. Teens ask for the materials, but the library administration and colleagues

often raise concerns about the materials' language, sexual content, and violence. This is a perfect opportunity to sell the additions to the collection as a beta project. Tell the administration that it's okay to start small to find out how well the materials circulate and the kinds of feedback provided on the inclusion of urban lit in the collection.

It's not necessary to buy every urban lit title available to start the collection. Instead buy a few titles that are certain to be popular with teens. Gather feedback from the teens who check out the materials. After a short period of time, perhaps three months, show the administration the positive comments received about the materials and the circulation numbers (which one can assume are high) for the new additions. Include information about the cost of the materials and how those circulation figures demonstrate that the money is being well spent.

Once it's clear that the collection is successful, then consider expanding on what was originally purchased. Don't just focus on expansion, however; use the beta period as a way to find out what teens are interested in regard to urban lit and what titles and authors might be important to add once the beta period is over. The beta phase should demonstrate how successful the program, service, or collection is and it should also provide information for making changes as the project moves out of beta.

IT'S OK TO MAKE MISTAKES

The beta approach to new and improved programs and services provides librarians with the opportunity to make mistakes and fix them. Promote that new urban lit collection in the library as a beta project. Actively ask for feedback. And just as actively, let teens, administrators, colleagues, and community members know what you learned from the feedback and the changes that will be made as a result. Don't hide from needing to revise. Embrace it. Teens learn from making mistakes and so can you. Consider the beta approach as a way to say, "I messed up but then I fixed it." That sends the message that the library is regularly looking at what it does and how it does it. It sends the message that the library is willing to change to provide the best service possible. It sends the message that the library is willing to admit that sometimes things don't go as well as hoped and planned, but that doesn't mean the institution gives up. It just means that new approaches need to be considered.

If librarians are willing to take risks in teen services to innovate and serve the population successfully, then teens will know they have access to a library that is willing to serve their twenty-first-century needs and that they have access to a staff who is willing to stand up for those needs. Isn't that what libraries and librarians are supposed to do for the entire community?