

## Readers' Advisory Service in LIS Education

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### Abstract

*Readers' Advisory (RA) is one of the important library services. This paper tries to throw light on the place of RA component in current LIS curriculum and its awareness among educators. The syllabi of all the universities in Maharashtra offering LIS course were assessed. Along with this, a questionnaire survey was conducted of all currently working LIS teachers, permanent and visiting. The collected data showed that almost none of the universities have RA portion in their syllabi. The educators, mostly aware of RA, are of the opinion that it should be a component of LIS theory paper as well as practical.*

**Keywords:** LIS Educators, LIS Syllabus, Maharashtra, RA Tools, Reading Recommendation

### 1. Introduction

Education is the foundation for the future of any profession. To ensure a better future for the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession in India, LIS education needs to be relevant to its requirements. Attracting readers to the library is one of the biggest problems faced by most of the library professionals. It is necessary to find whether LIS schools are equipping budding professionals with the capabilities necessary to succeed in the profession. There is a need for revamping the curricula to bring this course in tune with the demands of the actual profession. This paper attempts to take a review of the current teaching of LIS with special focus on Readers' Advisory (RA) service.

#### 1.1 About RA

Readers' Advisory (RA) service involves recommending reading material to the readers that are suitable to their reading tastes. It plays a pivotal

role in inculcation and promotion of reading habits, thereby attracting readers and popularizing libraries. Conceived in the last quarter of the 19th century in America, RA developed along with the advent of public libraries. However, in the early years, the primary mission of the public library was believed to be making available the reading material for self-education and not for leisure or recreation. Even the librarians believed it to be their duty to lead their readers from 'lower-level reading' (fiction) to 'higher-level reading' (non-fiction). In the second phase that began in the early 1980s, however, the patrons' own reading likes and dislikes became the central concern for librarians' recommendations; making RA an integral part of library services (Kimball, 2006).

Saricks' (2005) definition of RA aptly explains its evolved nature. According to her, "A successful readers' advisory service is one in which knowledgeable, nonjudgmental staff help fiction and nonfiction readers with their leisure-reading needs". As the first part of this definition points out, the library professional has to have knowledge of a variety of sources and be open to all kinds of genres. The latter part denotes the understanding of readers'

needs. RA interviews are conducted by librarians, to find out what the individual reader enjoys reading. As Ross (2006) fittingly stated, "Effective RA work is a matchmaking service; a successful match is made when the reader asks for 'a good book' and ends up getting reading suggestions for materials likely to be enjoyable." RA interviews are a must to make this right match, as readers rarely provide sufficient details in their initial requests. But "before librarians can practice readers' advisory well, they must be taught well". (Shearer & Burgin, 2001)

## **2. Review of Literature**

A literature search was carried out in primary and secondary source databases, to explore the previous research conducted on RA as a part of LIS education. One of the basic and the most important sources referred was 'The Readers' Advisor's Companion' (Shearer & Burgin, Eds., 2001). A compilation of works by 18 renowned LIS experts including Joyce Saricks and Duncan Smith, this book is a must-read to understand how RA is a necessary part of LIS education. In one of the chapters contained in this book, Crowley (2001) took a detailed overview of developing an RA course and provided a specimen syllabus as a guideline. He also examined the academic context in which such curriculum development takes place; the obstacles to the development of the course and various tactics to overcome them.

Watson (2000) underlined the importance and need for RA in the LIS curriculum. She listed 19 most common topics that should be added in RA course, commenting that "Schools of library and information science should provide formal coursework to enable their graduates to understand user needs, available resources, and ways in which readers should be

served appropriately". Wiegand (1997) reiterated the need for research on reading to empower RA. He argued that LIS profession "...has drawn definitional boundaries around the word 'information' so tightly as to exclude research on reading" which still forms the very basis of learning.

Though RA was conceptualized in America, according to Shearer & Burgin (2001), it is now "Partly Out of Sight; Not Much in Mind" there. The current LIS Masters core curriculum as accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) is not much inclusive of RA. It mostly is offered only as an elective. Shearer & Burgin (2001) conducted a survey of LIS schools' faculty members, enquiring whether selected RA topics were required and/or elective in their courses. Their findings showed that surveyed RA topics were covered in the core curricula of less than 40% of the responding schools.

A survey of librarians conducted by Library Journal in 2013 (as cited in Anderson, 2016) showed that 42% respondents took no RA coursework in their MLIS programs, and 23% reported no RA education opportunities at their library. Anderson (2016) also discussed the recent trends in RA education like emerging RA software, lending of e-books in a library; and the future direction such as emphasis on the role of the readers' advisor, and best practices for RA. In conclusion, she expressed her fear that "if younger librarians and academics are not taught about RA ... work is done in RA education since the 1980s risks being lost"; making special note that RA education needs to be accessible to both learning professionals and practitioners.

On similar lines, Crowley (2014) quoted an incident was due to budget constraints, instead of hiring additional qualified staff, current staff was given

extended duties and work hours. He argued that it showed how librarians professionally educated in readers' advisory were sidestepped at jobs and called it "a missed opportunity to professionalize readers' advisory service." He also criticized the ALA syllabus of MLIS "lacking an appreciation of the value of RA". Fleet (2008) discussed in detail the issues and challenges in teaching RA and recommended an active collaboration between library educators and library practitioners to develop a strong foundation for RA theory and practice.

ALA as an apex body has always been a front-runner in almost every development in the LIS field. However, the reviewed literature showed that RA is facing neglect even in America, a country known to be its pioneer. It necessitated a study of RA in Indian LIS education scenario. Hence this research was proposed.

### 3. Research Design

It was evident from the review of literature that there is a lack of research about the Indian scenario on RA in LIS education. To bridge this gap, research was undertaken to study the inclusion of RA in LIS education.

#### 3.1 Objectives

The objectives of the research were –

- i. To find out the level of inclusion of RA in the current LIS education
- ii. To analyze the opinions of LIS educators on RA as a part of syllabi

#### 3.2 Scope

The geographical scope of this research was limited to the state of Maharashtra, India. All the 8 regular universities and 1 open university in the state having

the LIS department were taken into consideration, along with the colleges affiliated to them that are running LIS courses (Appendix II). Population for the research was all currently working permanent and visiting faculty in these LIS departments.

### 3.3 Research Methodology

Latest syllabi of the 9 universities were checked for any inclusion of RA. Then, a questionnaire survey was conducted of the permanent as well as visiting faculty currently working with 14 LIS departments of those universities and colleges affiliated to them. It was with a dual aim - (i) to understand their opinions about adding RA to the syllabi; (ii) to assess the cognizance of the various elements of RA among LIS educators. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions and was prepared using Google Forms (Appendix I). Personal details of the respondents were not sought in order to ensure that the collected data would be completely anonymous. The questionnaire was sent by email to 51 LIS educators throughout Maharashtra, out of which 30 responded.

### 4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

After the assessment LIS syllabi of 9 universities in Maharashtra with a working LIS department, it was observed that bar one, none of them had an explicit mention of RA as a component of either Bachelors' or Masters' curricula. The only instance found was in MU syllabus, (BLISc – Sem. I – Module III – PABLI 105 – Reference & Information Sources and Services) where there is mention as "advisory and guiding assistance". But the Select Reading List given at the end of that paper did not include any specific RA sources.

While collecting the preliminary information of the research population, it was observed that the

number of permanent LIS teaching faculty was quite low. The rest were mainly the visiting faculty who conducted the teaching in addition to their appointment as a University or College Librarian/ Assistant Librarian etc. The first question in the questionnaire, therefore, sought information about the nature of the appointment. It was observed that out of the 30 respondents, 16 were permanent LIS faculty and 14 were visiting faculty.

Since the assessment of syllabi had already shown the lack of inclusion of RA, the next enquiry was to find out the possible reasons for the same. In response, 40% agreed that there is not much awareness about RA among subject experts, and it is not considered as one of the core services; while 20% cited budget constraints. Six respondents remarked that RA is taught as a part of their curriculum. One respondent commented, "Probably the LIS professionals have not realized the value of advisory and recommender services..." Another response was that RA is proposed to be a part of their revised syllabus. Still, others gave opinion that it was not possible to add many necessary components like RA due to the vast syllabus of two year integrated LIS course.

When asked whether RA should be included in the syllabus, 29 responded positively. Only 1 response was negative stating that RA is not an important service and should not be added separately in LIS syllabus. For that one respondent, the questionnaire ended there itself, as answers to further questions were expected only if the answer to this question was positive. Percentage, henceforth, was calculated with respect to the 29 positive responses received.

Regarding the weightage of marks and hours to be allocated to RA per annum, 35% said that it should be 10 marks - 7 hours; 24% voted for 15 marks – 10 hours; while 14% each decided on 5 marks - 3 hours and 20 marks - 15 hours. Two respondents proposed that as an elective, RA should be a complete paper of 100 marks. To the query that whether RA should have a practical component, 27 agreed, and 2 disagreed.

When incorporated as a unit in LIS syllabi, whether RA should have a practical component along with theoretical; and which RA topics should they both include, were the following questions. Responses out of 29, regarding what should be encompassed under RA theory and practical were as given in Table1.

RA theory		RA practical	
Learning historical background of RA	41%	Handling various printed as well as electronic RA tools	69%
Understanding about appeal factors	55%	How to talk with readers and conduct RA interviews	86%
Awareness of various genres, subgenres in fiction & non-fiction	52%	Training in identifying the appeal from the reader's description	72%
Knowledge of RA tools	93%	How to write book reviews, annotations for books	66%
Current trends in RA	90%	Making lists of genre-wise top-selling titles, popular authors	66%
		Preparation of Reading Maps	62%

**Table 1: Topics to be included in RA theory and Practical Component**

For RA theory, 5 respondents suggested additions to given choices as skills and training for Readers' Advisors; the international status of RA; how exactly the service should be provided; value and importance of RA; its usefulness to the various user segments; RA case studies; and a component on Bibliotherapy. Suggested additions for RA practical were communication skills; compiling books about books by subjects and genre; and interview of the author. While answering this question, a respondent commented that patrons needed to be made aware of library personnel's willingness to help and ability to advice about good reading.

Further inquiries were made to determine the level of awareness about RA sources and tools. It was observed that 35% of respondents had not referred to any of the RA textbooks. One response replied "Not Applicable" as that person was not teaching the subject. Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library by Joyce Saricks and Research-based RA by Jessica Moyer were referred by 28%. Genreflecting: A guide to popular reading interests by Diana Tixier Herald (ed.) was referred by 24%. Of the remaining, 10% noted titles other than given choices.

The query about the usage of various RA tools showed that LibraryThing and Goodreads were the most popular along with books about books. A couple of responses made a few additions to the listed RA tools like Fiction\_L; Amazon; Social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, e-mails, phone calls, TV, book reviews in newspapers etc.

## 5. Findings and Conclusion

### 5.1 Findings

The evaluation of LIS syllabi of 9 universities in Maharashtra showed the absence of RA in them. The survey revealed that almost all the responding

LIS educators thought that RA should be a part of LIS curriculum. Though 6 respondents insisted that RA is already taught as a part of their curriculum, it was not reflected in their respective syllabi during the background check. It can be considered that in some of the LIS departments, RA could be taught as a part of their Reference Service module but not mentioned in syllabus. The RA awareness level among respondents was good, with many of them giving additional suggestions.

### 5.2 Conclusion

It can be concluded that RA as a component does not carry much importance in Maharashtra LIS curricula and there is a need for refurbishing the syllabi to incorporate RA component. However, growing consciousness about this service was observed among the current LIS professionals. To keep on with the awareness of RA incoming generations of librarians, it needs to be an integral part of LIS syllabus. The review of the literature showed that RA currently held less significance on international LIS education scenario as well. The present research can serve as a starting point to build the foundations of RA in Indian LIS curricula. Sound background of education in RA can have remarkable impact on RA service, preparing the budding professionals to impart value-added library services.

## 6. Suggestions

It is suggested that RA should be given a prominent place in LIS syllabi. In addition to it, RA should be a focal topic for various conferences, seminars, workshops and similar programs. This may go a long way in ensuring the continuous updating of the professionals with respect to various elements of RA. There should also be more research in 'readers'

and 'reading habits' which will provide a basis for further research in RA to be conducted both within the LIS profession and in many other fields.

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