The "Place" of the Librarian in the Deskless Library:
Do Roving Reference Models Create a More User-Centered Library?

Matthew Griffis
University of Southern Mississippi
School of Library and Information Science
matthew.griffis@usm.edu

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Project Abstract

Following a multicase design, and using two academic libraries and one public library in the United States as cases for study, this research project explored the spatiality of differing models of roving reference service at selected public and academic libraries. Its main objectives were, first, to assess the extent to which each library’s approach to roving service was user-centered and second, identify best practices for the implementation of such models.

Methods included: research interviews with users and librarians; observations of library activity; photography; and floorplan analysis through mental mapping exercises with users and librarians. Key findings suggest that, while varying degrees of the traditional, desk-based (librarian-centered) model of service persists in all three case libraries, both hybrid and fully roving forms of roving reference service have the potential to create more user-centered library spaces.[1]

[1] Although this project’s funding period was extended into the spring of 2016, the PI presented his *preliminary* findings in January of 2016 at the ALISE conference in Boston (the slides from which are available on the OCLC Research Grant reports webpage). However, since data from Library C were still being analyzed, the project’s preliminary findings as presented were quite different from the findings presented in this final report.

Introduction

As information technologies become more mobile, so do information professionals. Equipped with tablets, laptops, and smartphones, librarians can now “roam” a library floor, assisting users at their “point of need” rather than remaining stationed behind large, traditional reference or information desks (Kramer, 1996; McCabe and MacDonald, 2011). This is known as roving reference service.

While some public and academic libraries have implemented “hybrid models” of roving (i.e., traditional, desk-based service combined with limited or scheduled roving) other libraries have implemented fully roving models that eliminate fixed service points entirely. Advocates of the general roving approach have emphasized its flexibility, often positioning it within the evolving concept of the “user-centered library” (Lushington, 2002; Hibner, 2005).

But just how user-centered are roving reference service models? Is one approach—hybrid versus fully roving service—more user-centered than the other?

Background and Statement of the Research Problem

Despite great advances in online collections and virtual library services, library buildings remain necessary not just for organizing core library operations but also for defining and prescribing certain kinds of social relations that in many ways define the library organization, its purpose, and its relationships with users. When moving in physical space, people engage in a kind of “spatial language” they take for granted. This has profound effects on their perceptions of themselves and defines their relationships to the other people and things that surround them (Lawson, 2001). Therefore, building layout and design profoundly affects the nature of the library as a lived space (Lefebrve, 1991) which, in turn, influences the experiences and perceptions of those inside it.

An earlier but related study (Griffis, 2014) investigated the materially-embedded relations of power between librarians and users in medium-sized public library buildings and, specifically, how library building design and appearance influences spatial behavior and as well as user and staff identity. The study found that, despite the emergence of the so-called “user centered library” paradigm in library services and planning (see Nahl, 2003; Lushington, 2002; or Woodward, 2010), the three libraries examined in that first study still relied on many of the same *librarian-centered* models of control that were “built into” standard library design in the modern age (Oehlerts, 1991; Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw, 2010). In other words, public library spaces are still conceived and enacted with the librarian (including library collections and back-of-house operations) rather than the user at the center of the service model. Indeed, the perception of the reference librarian (as well as the large, fortress-like desk they usually occupy) as the focal point of power persists, even in some newly designed libraries (Griffis, 2014).

What Griffis (2014) did not examine, however, were libraries that employ roving reference. For the past decade, developments in (and the increasing affordability of) portable information technologies have helped produce the “roving librarian”—the librarian or information professional who serves users *in situ*, in effect “taking their desk with them” via tablets, smartphones, and headsets. This new model implies a radically different concept of library space: one that is, perhaps, more “user centered” than older models, since it may be assumed that the diminished presence of fixed librarian stations has the potential to create a space with fewer (or perhaps none) of the retraining influences observed in the traditional model (Lushington, 2002). Or, on the other hand, would the concept of librarians everywhere, all the time, produce an even more librarian-centered model?

Review of the Literature

This problem will be explored through the lens of library space and power relationships. The theoretical framework can be found in the writings of Lefebvre (1991), Foucault (1977), Lawson (2001), and Dale and Burrell (2008), who collectively explain how embodied space is the product of complex social relations and how modern organizations and institutions use prescribed spatial relationships between people and groups as a means of creating identity and influencing behavior for the purposes of realizing organizational goals.

While some have questioned the relevance of traditional reference service in the new century (see Massey-Burzio, 1998 and Carlson, 2007), others claim that the nature of reference service is merely evolving into new forms (Finerty, 2012). Roving reference is, arguably, an example of such change. While the literature includes some mention of “outpost reference”—which describes how librarians set up satellite reference service points in other parts of the community or campus (Nims, 1998; Davis and Weber, 2002; Schmehl-Hines, 2007)—“roving reference” describes how librarians serve users already *within* the library but away from fixed points of service. It is sometimes called “point-of-need” reference service (MacDonald and McCabe, 2011) and would seem appealing to library users increasingly concerned with getting what they want, the moment they want it.

Although it seems there is little published research related to roving reference, what does exist offers some insights. An early study (Kramer, 1996) showed that while roving reference librarians reached more users at an academic library, the nature of the library space was more or less unchanged since librarians were still anchored to the telephones and computers of their reference desks. Since then, however, portable technology has released librarians from these physical constraints (Hibner, 2005; Arendt and Taylor, 2006; MacDonald and McCabe, 2011); and while fixed reference desks are still commonplace (even at libraries that use roving reference models), it can now be safely assumed that roving librarians have much less reliance on physical, fixed desks than they did in 1996.

The existing literature offers little, however, about roving reference and the nature of power relationships between users and librarians. Indeed, the original study (Griffis, 2014) suggested that there may be no true “user space” at all in the traditional model: that everything is, in some way, librarian-centered. But while some argue that roving models now have the potential to reposition users on “their own turf” or “their own ground” (Nims, 1998), such claims have not yet been examined in the field.

Goals and Objectives

This study’s objective, therefore, was to do just that: to examine the nature of power relationships in libraries that use roving models using a variety of data gathering techniques. Its guiding research question was: *To what extent, if any, do roving reference models have the potential to create a more user-centered library?*

A secondary objective included identifying possible best practices for the effective implementation of such models.

Study Design and Methods

This study's design and choice of methods rested on two guiding principles. First was that any worthwhile examination into the spatiality of roving service would best consider both models, the hybrid and the fully roving, instead of just one. Second, that any useful understanding of "user-centeredness" would have to be more conceptual than literal: "centeredness," in other words, is not a question of spatial arrangement as much as it is spatial *relations*. Power relationships in embodied space thus depend as much upon human perception as they do physical design. Methods, therefore, would focus as much as possible on recording and better understanding this perception.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative multicase approach (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2013) using two academic libraries and one public library (two libraries employed a hybrid model and the third employed a fully roving approach). Table 1 compares each case library.

Case	Roving Model	Operational Levels	Other Modes
Library A *(academic library)*	hybrid (1 reference desk on main level)	5	Also offers virtual, on-call, and "by appointment" reference services.
Library B *(academic library)*	hybrid (1 reference desk on main level and 2 limited use podiums on upper levels)	3	Also offers virtual, on-call, and "by appointment" reference services.
Library C *(public library)*	fully roving (no traditional reference desks; only 3 limited use podiums)	1	Also offers online reference service.

Table 1. *Case library profiles.*

Case libraries were selected based on service model as well as accessibility to the researcher. Libraries A and B were within one day's driving distance and Library C was two days' drive.[2]

Data Collection and Procedures

After securing their cooperation, the PI made site visits to each case library for data collection. These usually lasted 5-6 days and occurred in the early spring (Library A), late spring (Library B), and late fall (Library C) of 2016. Methods included semi-structured interviews with library users, reference librarians, and library administrators; written observations of general library activity; photography of the library spaces; and floorplan analysis through mental mapping exercises with interview participants. Table 2 summarizes the total data collected at each library.

[2] While it was difficult enough to locate libraries with any model of roving service, it was especially difficult to locate one that employed *fully roving* service. Case library recruitment, which began in March of 2015 and continued steadily until late September, was perhaps the most time-consuming aspect of data collection.

Interviews lasted from 25 to 35 minutes and, through a series of open- and closed-ended questions, prompted interviewees to reflect on their experiences in and perceptions of the library space. Participants were then asked to sketch a two-dimensional map of their library from memory using only a pencil, a letter-sized sheet of paper and a maximum of five minutes. Interviewees were then prompted to reflect on what they drew.[3] Library user interviewees were recruited with research posters erected at the main entrance of each case library; librarian interviewee recruitment was possible via internal, emailed invitations distributed by library administration. All interviews were voluntary, and all interviewees were offered a coffee gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Observations of library activity were recorded in a field notebook and focused on general activity, including the placement and movement of people in the library space as well as general interaction among users and librarians. The PI also photographed the interior layout of each library extensively (vacant spaces only; no users or staff).

Data Sources	Library A	Library B	Library C	Totals
Interviews and mental maps	8 librarians 3 users	4 librarians 5 users	6 librarians 10 users	*18 librarians* *18 users*
Photographs	355	234	457	*1046 photos*
Observations *(notebook pages)*	11	9	13	*33 notebook pages*

Table 2. *Data collection at each case library.*

The study's methods were approved by the PI's Institutional Review Board in the early spring of 2015. While library users were guaranteed anonymity, participating libraries could not be guaranteed complete anonymity since details of their building designs and services could reveal their identities. All interviewees were nevertheless given pseudonyms, and each case library the generic labels A, B, and C.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the single- and cross-case approach recommended by Stake (2006). Analysis focused heavily on the interview transcripts, which were transcribed in their entirety and coded using a qualitative coding application. Coding followed a thematic approach and, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), began with a basic schema derived from the study's adopted theoretical frameworks (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1977; and Dale and Burrell, 2008).

The PI made several passes of all 36 transcripts, revising the schema each time. The final schema was then applied to mental maps, written observations, and selected photographs.

[3] One of the most revealing data collection tools used in the first study was mental mapping. "Mental mapping" is a tool used in studies of environmental cognition (Kuipers, 1984; Tversky, 2000) and is, essentially, a way of allowing interviewees to express their impressions of their surrounding physical environment as a drawing or sketch.

Results

Below are brief summaries of the study's key findings. Forthcoming publications will expand on these. Please contact the PI for information on forthcoming publications.

Key Finding 1: Roving reference service changes power relationships within the library space.

Aspects of the traditional, librarian-centered spatial model of service persisted in all three libraries, no matter their model of roving service.

- This was perhaps most evident in the ongoing need for the fixity of certain processes and operations—not least of which the work of reference librarians, even at the "deskless" Library C where librarians still revealed a slight reliance on their podiums, often planning their movements through the library space with the locations of these podiums in mind.
- Overall, users and librarians alike still perceived certain points within each of the library spaces as being more important than others. These places were often where reference transactions frequently occurred or were most likely to occur—at a desk or otherwise. In all three cases, reference librarians identified these high-traffic locations as "gathering areas." Interviewees at Libraries A and B recognized traditional reference desks specifically as "main points" of activity.
- There also remains a need among librarians in all three case libraries to maintain some degree of supervisory dominance over users. This need is justified, arguably, by librarians' legal and ethical responsibilities to maintain order for reasons of public safety. Even at Library C, where roving librarians are encouraged to use their podiums *only when necessary*, some still felt drawn to and organized their activities around the podiums.

Nevertheless, the interviews (especially those with library users) and the mental mapping exercises indicate a softening of the traditional model. As found in the first study (Griffis, 2014), most users perceived the librarians as "being everywhere" in the library space since the commanding position many of their reference desks occupied gave them a wide latitude of surveillance.

In the present study, however, while many users expressed an awareness of librarians "being everywhere" it seems these users perceived this as less of a "watchman" strategy. This was most evident in the mental mapping exercises, especially those conducted with users.

- There seemed, overall, two approaches users took when completing their maps of the libraries: what this researcher calls the "hierarchical method" and the "experience-based method."[4] Notably, most user interviewees in the first study (Griffis, 2014) followed the hierarchical method—only one or two of all in the entire sample followed the other method. In this study, the proportion of user interviewees at Libraries A and B (both hybrid model libraries) that used one method over the other when completing their maps was

[4] The former describes how some would begin their maps by drawing what they perceived to be the most prominent or important points within the library's layout. These "points" were usually fixed service stations (if applicable), pieces of large equipment, and prominent design features such as stairwells and atria. The user would then proceed "down" a hierarchy, filling in features such as displays, artwork, and water fountains, considered much less important. The experience-based method, on the other hand, entailed completing maps as a kind of narrative: that is, users would consider their most typical visit to the library and begin their maps with the library's front entrance or foyer, then advance to specific collections and spaces that they used the most frequently or had a personal importance to them. In short, while one approach recognized the inherent architectural hierarchy of library spaces, the other often ignored it and instead relied upon a more subjective, personalized approach.

approximately 50/50. However, not one user interviewee at Library C (which used a fully roving model) used the hierarchical approach. Every user interviewee there (see Table 2) followed the "experience-based" method.

- Despite the patterns among user interviewees, librarian interviewees at all three case libraries used a more hierarchical approach to creating their maps. Even at Library C, librarians tended to insert the little podiums on their maps early in the mapping process. This may suggest that, while librarians at Library C are not encouraged to base their operations around them, the podiums nevertheless retain a small degree of importance. (Most notably, very few users at Library C even included these podiums on their maps.)

Comparisons between both studies strongly suggest that users in the present study perceive spatial relationships within the library differently than users in the former study (Griffis, 2014). The notable difference is, of course, that libraries in the former study employed the traditional, librarian-centered model while the libraries in the present study employed some form of roving service.

As the maps and the interviews together suggest, user perceptions of the three case libraries included in this study tended to be less hierarchical overall, the library with fully roving service (Library C) perhaps the least hierarchical of all. And if we follow this study's theoretical principles even more faithfully, these patterns further suggest that users perceive the library spaces less hierarchically because they also perceive their relationships to librarians less hierarchically. (And that, whatever power differential does exist, it is likely not rooted in spatial design.)

Key Finding 2: Effectiveness of roving service is highly dependent on two key variables: method of implementation and librarian visibility.

If roving reference models have the potential to change power relationships between librarians and users in library space, the effectiveness of the model will depend on a number of key variables.

First is the appropriateness of the model (hybrid versus fully roving) given the library's type and the information needs and behaviors of its most prominent user groups—not, as can sometimes be the case, according to operational resources or librarian preferences.[5]

- Data indicate that roving service of either model better satisfies "lighter" reference queries than "heavier" ones. Consider Libraries A and B, both of which are academic libraries whose users are predominantly students, professors, and other scholars. Reference queries at these libraries are frequently "heavy" and thus often require extensive interactions between users and reference librarians who themselves must access a variety of complicated information resources. As librarian interviewees at all three case libraries revealed, not all—in fact very few—"heavy" reference questions can be handled by a roving librarian, even one equipped with a tablet or smartphone.
- The "hybrid model" that Libraries A and B employ combines roving not just with desk-based reference service but also on-call service, forms of fully-synchronous virtual service, and "by appointment" service with subject specialists. This multifaceted approach is appropriate (necessary, in fact) given the variety and complexity of user demands at those libraries.

[5] Interviews with librarians and library administrators revealed that administration at all three case libraries experienced resistance from some librarians when the roving model was implemented. According to administrators, these librarians preferred to stay with the traditional, desk-based model of reference service since it offered them a sense of safety and predictability. Roving, by contrast, might make them appear less professional, almost comparable to a "customer service representative" frequently seen at large retail stores.

- Library C is the notable exception since it is a public library, one that models itself as a “popular materials” library. And as many librarian and user interviewees at Library C indicated, reference transactions tend to be overwhelmingly “light” and thus tend not to require extended periods of interaction or sophisticated information resources to answer.

The second key variable is librarian visibility—that is, the frequency and extent to which users can see and positively identify roving librarians on duty.

- For instance, users at all three case libraries claimed that, while professional attire often helped them identify roving librarians, more specific indicators such as lanyards (or badges with “Please ask me” or “Need help?” printed on them) were more reliable. At Library C, where roving librarians were expected to wear uniforms and lanyards, no user interviewees expressed difficulty identifying roving librarians.
- At Libraries A and B, however, while all librarians dressed professionally few were observed to be wearing lanyards while roving. Some user interviewees expressed surprise upon learning that librarians roved more frequently than they had supposed. In these cases, not only were missing lanyards likely an issue, but as some users observed many roving librarians did not appear much older than college students, making the roving librarians even less distinguishable.

Even with easily identifiable librarians, however, a degree of consistency is just as important. In other words, it is not just a matter of *whether* roving librarians can be seen; it is also a matter of *where* and *how regularly* they are seen that affects user awareness. And this is where, once again, there were substantial differences in findings from Libraries A and B versus Library C.

- Despite regularly scheduled roving at their libraries, most user interviewees at Libraries A and B did not consider roving service their first solution to an information problem. They were instead drawn more to virtual and/or desk-based services since these were available nearly all the time while roving service was available only at peak times of the day (or, in one case, only during the busiest weeks of term). As a result, roving librarians were perceived as a kind of “ad-hoc” solution to periodic surges of activity rather than a permanent part of their library’s service model.

It is also possible that librarians who follow pre-determined “routes” while roving may not be as visible to their users as they suppose. While pre-determined routes suggest a consistent degree of librarian visibility, unless such routes cover a substantial portion of library space (and specifically, the kinds of spaces where users are most likely to need reference assistance) they will likely be less than effective.

- For instance, librarians at Libraries A and B discussed following pre-determined (and often repeated) routes, which they also believed provided some consistency to their visibility. User interviews at those libraries did not corroborate this, however. The researcher’s own observations of library activity suggested that, while many roving librarians indeed followed set routes through well populated parts of the library, these parts contained users that, it could have been assumed, were not as in need of reference service since they were already engrossed in work on computer terminals, in study rooms, or in quiet reading areas.

- Although some librarians at Libraries A and B discussed visiting places such as book stacks, near catalogue terminals or reference collections (in other words, places where students would more likely be information-seeking rather than information consuming), researcher observations noted that roving in these areas often appeared hurried or rushed, despite the regular presence of users. Observations also revealed that librarians at Libraries A and B rarely made eye contact when passing users, seemingly preferring that users approach them rather than the other way around.
- Library C was once again the exception, since fully roving service necessitates an almost inescapable degree of librarian visibility. Notably, while some librarian interviewees at Library C revealed that they sometimes followed pre-determined routes, overall this was not a pattern in the interviews nor did it appear in the observational data. Users at Library C were nevertheless unanimous in claiming that librarians were constantly visible. (A mitigating factor was undoubtedly Library C’s size; the building not only had a much smaller footprint than Libraries A and B but also had only one operational level.)

Discussion and Conclusions

Do roving reference service models have the potential to create a more user-centered library? Study findings strongly suggest so. Indeed, roving reference may even have the potential to create an almost entirely new paradigm of in-person reference service.

The second of these two claims hinges largely on theoretical considerations, most particularly of the aforementioned Foucault (1977) who asserts that several 18th century forms of socio-spatial arrangement and control influenced modern building types. Top among these is Bentham’s “Panopticon,” a circular prison design that placed prisoners in perimeter cells while shrouding prison guards in a central, darkened tower. Fewer guards were thus needed to supervise the prisoners who were, in effect, not just prisoners of their cells but also of their guards’ constant gaze. This model underlies the design of many modern institutional building types, not least hospitals and certain types of school classrooms—modern libraries, too.

If the librarians of the traditional, librarian-centered model have always been “guards” watching users from across their large, fortress-like desks, asserting a pervasive kind of dominance over the library space, then it is not difficult to see why roving reference dismantles this power structure. While users in the roving model are, to some degree, still “watched” by librarians, roving librarians are, in effect, just as easily “watched” by users. Therefore, the more librarians are out from behind their desks, the more visible and equally accessible they are to users. Users thus perceive the library as their territory as much as they perceive it the librarian’s. And, if Library C is of any indication, eliminating desks entirely only increases this effect.

The implications of these findings and conclusions could be far-reaching as libraries, public and academic alike, reconsider their roles as places in the new century. It would not be unwise for library administrators wishing to implement roving service to value librarian approachability as much as they do information-seeking or technology skills. It would not be unwise, either, for libraries building entirely new facilities to consider roving reference from the very beginning of the design phase. It is hoped that this study’s findings may inform such initiatives.

Dissemination

Preliminary findings were presented at the *Annual Conference of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE)* on 7 January 2016 in Boston, MA as “Out of Place: Examining User-Centeredness and Roving Reference Service Models at Academic and Public Libraries.”

Complete results and revised findings were presented as a juried research paper at the *American Library Association Annual Conference: Library Research Roundtable “Connecting Research and Practice” Forum* on 25 June 2016 in Orlando, FL as “Roving Reference Service and User-Centeredness: Findings from Public and Academic Libraries.”

In addition to this report, two journal articles are nearing completion.

Budget

An official financial report was submitted by the Office of Research Administration, University of Southern Mississippi, under separate cover.

Further Information

For further information about this study or any of its key findings, please contact the Principal Investigator:

Dr. Matthew Griffis
Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Science
The University of Southern Mississippi
Ph: 601.266.4228
Fx: 601.266.5774
matthew.griffis@usm.edu

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