Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him: Client-Centered Technical Services

Mary K. Bolin, Head, Technical Services, Associate Professor
University of Idaho Library, Moscow, Idaho

ABSTRACT

Academics are being admonished to be "client-centered"--generally used to mean consumer or customer-oriented. This paper looks at the origins of "client-centeredness" in mental health care, and explores the idea of "client-centered" academic institutions, specifically the technical services functions of academic libraries. Philosophical and practical recommendations for a client-centered technical services operation conclude the paper.

Introduction

I began thinking about the topic of this paper because I was sick of hearing the phrase "client-centered." It is an all-purpose term of abuse in discussions about higher education. Academics are admonished to be "client-centered"--generally used to mean consumer or customer-oriented--and to abandon our "provider-centered" ways in favor of a model which gives the public what it wants.

Origins in Mental Health Care

"Client-centered" is often used as a synonym for "user-oriented," "service-oriented," etc., but its origin is in mental health care. The psychologist Carl Rogers used "client-centered" and another term "non-directed," to mean that the therapist let the patient set the course of the therapy. The therapist might not make a diagnosis, might not label or categorize the patient as a way of structuring the therapy (which would be "provider-centered.") As it developed from the 1940s, "client-centered therapy [drew], ... upon many of the current streams of clinical, scientific, and philosophical thought which [were] present in our culture." (1)

"The progressive ... ideas of John Dewey ... reflected a stance in many ways antithetical to psychoanalysis ... [O]bservations in biology that demonstrated the remarkable capacity of living systems for self-regulation and self-repair was another challenge to the psychoanalytic vision." (2) The new model was a "nondirective, more egalitarian, client-centered stance that aimed to promote growth in individuals ... " (3) The term "client" was a conscious choice, because "the client ... is one who comes actively and voluntarily to gain help on a problem, but without any notion of surrendering his own responsibility for the situation." (4)

The training of therapists in this method "shifted from counselor technique to counselor attitude and philosophy." (5) "The primary point of importance here is the attitude held by the counselor toward the worth and the significance of the individual. How do we look upon others? Do we see each person as having worth and dignity in his own right?" (6)

The counselor's role in non-directed or client-centered counseling is not to be passive or laissez faire, but "to assume ... the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it ... and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client." (7) This "hypothesis in human relationships" (8) is the foundation of client-centered therapy.

Significantly, Rogers also states that, "especially meaningful have been our attempts to apply client-centered principles to our own organizational administration ..." (9) A recent book on Rogers' life and work states that "[a]lways faithful to his central theme--relationship ... From the one-to-one relationship in psychotherapy, he became interested ... in ... groups. He wrote about relationships in ... education and intimate partnership, and ... extended it to racial tension and international conflict resolution." (10)

What I read about Rogers and his work made me feel that being "client-centered" might be more than just an annoying buzz phrase, and that the concept as it was first developed might actually be meaningful, and have application to academic enterprises.

Academic Library Models

An explicitly client-centered academic library was proposed by Charles Martell in 1983 (11) In his model, the academic library would be reorganized from its present design (with separate departments determined by function) to a client-centered matrix which "brings librarians together into small work groups that are allied with designated client groups in the academic community ... The library's structure is based on a division by client-centered units; the ... units are small and each unit is allied with a different client group; librarians ... act in a multi-functional capacity." (12)

This model features "feedback channels for evaluating library performance; high level of interaction with the client; individualized/personalized service." (13) Its emphasis on the individual client is certainly in harmony with the concept of "client-centeredness" as it developed in psychotherapy and elsewhere. Its emphasis on interaction and personal service echoes the relationship which is so important to client-centered therapy.

Woodsworth et al., (14) envision the research library of the future, with organizational components for information handling, for designing access systems, and for evaluating user needs and service delivery. The library will be "proactive [in] identification or anticipation of user needs" (15) The result of this client-centered model would be "access systems are user-sensitive" and "user needs are met." (16) Like Martell, this is an organizational model which is meant to lead a client-centered library.

Veaner (17) does not speak directly to the concept of "client-centered" libraries, but in his writings urges academic librarians to accept "programmatic responsibility" for the library, and speaks of the empowerment which we have, "like teaching and research faculty, librarians' ... academic status has endowed them with programmatic responsibilities--the authority and obligation to redirect, reconstruct the library's service program." (18)

How Do We Define "Client-Centered?"

While the use of the term "client -centered" to mean "user-oriented" can certainly be applied to libraries, the more narrow meaning can also be of use to us, and I will be using this definition from now on: "Client-centered" is the approach in which each individual has the right of self-direction and self-determination, and in which the "provider" listens to the client and tries to provide services in a way which facilitate the client's autonomy and individuality. This definition does not prescribe behavior for the provider, it focuses on the results for the client.

The first two models for academic libraries cited above propose organizational changes to meet changing needs. Veaner advises us to change our outlook and attitude, with the possible result of organizational and other changes. Librarians may have a certain affinity for the client-centered concept. Modern librarianship as it emerged in the United States and elsewhere in the late nineteenth century is *the* client-centered

profession, founded with the aim of providing information and access through standardization. Moreover, like client-centered therapy, which trusts the patient to direct the therapy, modern librarianship has created systems which trust the user to use the library without intervention from a librarian.

Private vs. Public Sector

Veaner (19) contrasts "Characteristics of the Worlds of Business and Academe." (20) In business, processes are "highly integrated," whereas in academe there are "anarchic, highly personalized, jumbled processes; disorderly." In business there are "strong attempts to rationalize not-yet-integrated processes," while in academe we make only a "weak attempt to rationalize even conflicting processes." In business, "management provides central, strongly coordinated direction, with unified program," while in academe, "management provides vague direction, with little program unity; self-governance." In business, there are "outputs generally countable, with strong focus on bottom line or profits," but in academe the "main outputs intangible; quality and outcomes difficult to quantify; no profit." In business, there are generally "highly specific job descriptions," in academe there are "vague statements for professionals." In business, the "work is highly specifiable; usually there is a best way," but in academe, "work [is] uncertain, ill-defined; no two people do it alike; there is no best way." This "chaos" is what our critics want to control.

Those who admonish us to be client-centered often use the private sector as a club to beat us with. We are told that the way we do things would not make it in the private sector--the lack of a bottom line allows us to be wasteful, indifferent, bureaucratic. We may hesitate to refute this argument, by pointing out the differences between public and private sector operations, or by arguing with the claim that all private sector endeavors are paragons of customer service. It is hard to argue the argument that business ventures which stay in business must be doing something right.

A superficial survey of the private sector enterprises that we encounter every day tells us, however, that the private sector is as broad and varied as the public sector, and that certain individuals and types of service are models of excellence, service, innovation, which truly keep our needs in mind. I am equally sure that we can think of enterprises which do not seem to fit the private-sector myth--we wonder how they stay in business because they are so inept.

Then perhaps we can think of the enterprises which are excellent but seem indifferent to our needs in some way. I was waiting at home for the plumber that the idea for this paper took shape. The bathtub faucet was dripping hot water at an alarming rate, and when we called the plumber we were told, "It will be today or tomorrow." It was not today and it was not tomorrow, and there was not a call to advise us about it either. We took this very docilely, not like your average unsatisfied library patron. It is not my aim to disparage any profession or occupation, certainly not a skilled and often unpleasant trade like plumbing. Nor am I claiming that the anecdotes about annoying capitalists should make us self-satisfied and complacent. But I think we should not be intimidated by claims about the virtues of the private sector, and the implied criticism of not-for-profit endeavors. Perhaps instead we can take a look at the very strong tradition and ethic of service and responsiveness that librarians have, and lead the way at our institutions toward the client-centered model of higher education.

I have been speaking as if the private sector is a monolithic entity, of course it is not. What works for a fast food outlet is not what works for the plumber. If one fast food place is not what you want, there is another one next door, or you eat some other kind of food from some restaurant or grocery store which meets your needs. The plumber is another matter. In my small town, there are at least three plumbers for a population of 20,000 or so. Apparently, they are so busy all the time that they do not need to care if I would rather not

wait around the house for days on end. Moreover, they have competition, but only from other plumbers, which is not the same as the competition from all manner of food providers. Not only that, all I needed was to have a leaky faucet fixed, so financially and otherwise, my problem was a lower priority.

Higher education in general cannot be exactly like either one of these situations. Whatever we may learn or reject from either one, it seems clear that we have to be ourselves to be really client-centered, rather than being fake capitalists.

Now, what about technical services? In what ways can we be, or are we, client-centered? The things I want to mention are of two kinds: attitude and philosophy, and more specific actions which reflect those attitudes.

- Programmatic responsibility and the empowerment that underlies it are fundamental to this discussion. To be client-centered, we must be active, in charge, of our "program," and view it in the way that teaching faculty view the curriculum.
- As part of your program, keep your clients in mind. This is not as easy as it sounds, since we have more than one type of user--sometimes doing what one group wants makes another group feel unserved. The casual calumny against the library which I hear in conversation, overheard remarks, public forums, etc., is generally a case of the self-centered user who did not get the specific thing that he or she wanted. Are we giving poor service by not buying some trillion-dollar journal that Professor X requests? He thinks so, but he does not have to weigh the same conflicting needs, requests, priorities.
- Like a client-centered therapist, identify with the user.(21) I thought about this when it was time to vote, and I had to wonder again, "where do I go to vote?" After driving out to the fairgrounds, I discovered that *this time* my precinct votes at the university sports arena, i.e., I could have just walked over there. And it made me think of library practices--I am sure there is some logic about what kinds of elections are held where, and if I understood it, I would never have to wonder, or ask people, or look in the newspaper, I would just know where to go. This has to be how many library procedures seem to many users. One guiding principle ought to be not to drive users crazy.
- Be an expert. This is related to our programmatic responsibility. It is also related to the concept of the client-centered therapist who is not passive or laissez faire. It is not the same as being focused on the details of a procedure or project to the exclusion of real expertise--mastery of a subject in a way that is contributes effectively to the mission of the entire organization. We must contribute our expertise in bibliographic control or other areas to the mission of the library as a whole--when choosing, building, or maintaining automated systems, etc. We need fluent command of many details, but that is not the same as focusing only on the details, nor is it the same as knowing about the details to the exclusion of having any overall view of what should be going on.
- Say yes to everything. When someone asks you if you can do something, say yes. We do ourselves harm, and do our clients harm, when our automatic reaction to any idea, proposal, or possibility, is: we are too busy, the rules do not allow it, the purchasing office does not allow it, the vendor cannot supply it, and so on.
- Don't "get management." You go to your favorite office supply store which was always overflowing with great stuff, but then they "got management", and all they have is typing paper and Bic pens. This is the literal-minded application of a certain kind of "efficiency" which is really just expediency. It

makes the job easier without giving better service. In the library we are always engaged in a balancing act between a streamlined and efficient workflow and the need to be thorough and perform "value-added" services as well. It is hard for us to distinguish between balancing efficiency and thoroughness, two good things, with "balancing" expediency and inertia--doing things carelessly or skimpily but quickly or being so "careful" or "thorough" that we practically do nothing.

- Make the user autonomous. The models in the literature of the client-centered library (22) tend to emphasize the relationship between librarian and user. An important contribution to be made by technical services librarians, however, is to try to make the interaction between patron and librarian unnecessary whenever possible.
- Speaking very practically: catalog everything. The balancing act between the quick and the good is the essence of cataloging. As hard as it is, I believe we should catalog all collections, analyze virtually every series, and so on. Otherwise, we end up with little homegrown lists and card files to do what we should be doing.
- Integrate all files. What a service to users it has been to have more and more information in one place: if the catalog can include bibliographic information, the number and copies and volumes, circulation status, check-in information, binding status, etc., that is truly user-oriented.
- Continue to expand the concept of the catalog and the collection. More and more, we are giving users access to information regardless of where it "resides." (23)
- Be visible and take credit. I finally came to terms with the idea that marketing is what makes an organization visible, and what tells clients what the organization can do for them. I am not suggesting that your cataloging department should make an infomercial, but users know what reference librarians are good for, and they generally do not know what technical services librarians are good for. I believe the best ways to market ourselves combine some of the things I have already suggested: be active in planning and implementing the library's services and systems, work closely with your colleagues in other areas so that they know you care as much as they do about library users, and be active on campus, so that your teaching colleagues know you as well.

NOTES

1. Carl R. Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications, and Theory.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, c1951. p. 5.
2. Farber, Barry A, Debora C. Brink and Patricia M. Raskin. *The Psychotherapy of Carl Rogers: Cases and Commentary.* New York: Guilford Press, 1996. p. 4-5.
3. ibid., p. 5.
4. Rogers, p. 7.
5. ibid., p. 14.
6. ibid.
7. ibid., p. 29.
8. ibid., p. 23.
9. ibid., p. 12.
10. ibid., p. vii.

11. Martell, Charles. *The Client-Centered Academic Library: an Organizational Model.* (Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science, no. 42) Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983.

12. Ibid., p. 72.

13. Ibid., p. 73.

14. Woodsworth, Anne, et al. "The Model Research Library: Planning for the Future." *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 15:3 (July 1, 1989):132-138.

15. ibid., p. 134.

16. ibid.

17. Veaner, Allen B. "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II." *College & Research Libraries*, 55:5 (September 1994): 389-402.

18. ibid., p. 397.

19. Veaner, Allen B. *Academic Librarianship in a Transformational Age: Program, Politics, and Personnel.* Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990.

20. ibid., p. 56-57.

21. See among others Karen Markey, "Thus Spake the OPAC User." *Information Technology and Libraries* 2:4 (Dec. 1983):381-387 and Laine Farley, "The Evaluation of a User-Oriented System: the MELVYL System's Many Designers." *Information Technology and Libraries*, 11:2(June 1992):163-168.

22. Martell, loc. cit.

23. See among others William Gray Potter, "Expanding the Online Catalog." *Information Technology and Libraries* 8:2(June 1989):99-104.