

Demand-Driven Acquisitions: The Hegemony of the Canon Interrupted

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Demand driven acquisitions (DDA) is a disruptive technology in traditional collection development. The perceived dichotomy between the ethos that the librarian knows best and the reverence of user experience in library services and systems is examined. Embracing DDA as part of the evolution of library science comes through discerning its value to disrupt and augment traditional collection building ideology and methodology. We will learn that when implemented thoughtfully, not only will it fulfill immediate user need, it can also contribute to long-term collection strategies.



Introduction

Demand (or patron) driven acquisitions—DDA or PDA—is a method of monograph (mainly ebooks) purchasing that allows libraries to offer a wide range of content to their patrons but only purchase items as they are used. In its short history, DDA has evolved from the small scale purchasing of interlibrary loan requests to a fully developed collection development method that can be used in conjunction with more traditional methods (firm orders, approval plans). It has also garnered its fair share of controversy. Upheld as a savior for library budgets and condemned for its perceived alienation of the librarian’s role in collection development, it seems that everyone has an opinion on DDA.

In this paper, I intend to address the common fears and concerns surrounding DDA as found in the literature, and through the lens of a collections manager at an institution that was an early and enthusiastic adopter. User experience, library philosophy, and the practical realities of library management and operations will be interwoven into the case for embrac-

ing demand driven acquisitions as a natural evolution of the collection development landscape. I posit that the user can indeed be trusted to assist in the shaping of the library collection. Used appropriately for each individual library circumstance, and designed with sufficient professional librarian input, DDA is a radical tool that empowers the user, and has the potential to revolutionize the work of the collections librarian, that is, if we are willing to use it as such.

NOTE: I will not be addressing the swath of literature that discusses the problematic nature of ebooks as a format. It is beyond the scope of this paper.

Books are for Use; Save the Time of the User

In 2006, Karen Schneider famously asserted that the “user is not broken” in her Meme Masquerading as a Manifesto on her blog, the Free Range Librarian. She also told us that “Information flows down the path of least resistance. If you block a tool the users want, users will go elsewhere to find it.”¹ This has been hailed as a “touchstone for librarians eager to reinvent their

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institutions.”²² This is consistent with web-usability expert Jacob Nielsen’s adage that “usability rules the Web. Simply stated, if the customer can’t find a product, he or she will not buy it.”²³ Likewise, user-centered design, as conceived by guru Donald Norman, suggests that when a user fails at a task, they often assume it was because they were wrong, and not because the item was designed poorly.⁴ Transpose these well entrenched user-experience (UX) adages to known item searching or discovery—when the user cannot find what they are looking for because it has not been included in the library holdings is to assume that the user must be wrong in their search instincts and that they must conform to what the librarian has provided, or go elsewhere.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that books selected by users circulate more than titles selected by librarians. On the surface, this would appear to be a positive discovery. Not so in the literature critical of DDA; somehow it is used as a tool to suggest poor choices on the part of the user. Skeptics such as Sens and Fonseca suggest that perhaps low circulation is more a matter of librarian communication and outreach failure⁵, rather than the far more likely acceptance of a well-documented trend toward lower circulation⁶. Others suggest that use is not the best determinant of a quality library collection—what of the responsibility of the library to preserve the scholarly record and create research collections for the future?⁷ Use is further problematized by the characterization of “hogging” with studies such as this one with the fearsome title “Patron-driven acquisition and monopolistic use: are patrons at academic libraries using library funds to effectively build private collections?”⁸ In other studies, the drop in use of titles selected by undergrads over time suggests that user groups empowered to select should be limited.⁹ Faced with these arguments, the user cannot win—don’t use the books too soon, or too much.

Certainly, use is not the only metric to be considered when building library collections, but it is an important one, particularly for libraries where the primary mandate is to support teaching and curriculum. Not all libraries are research libraries, nor should all

libraries try to be. The great research libraries of our time are simply not likely to abandon their collection mandates in favour of user selection. Smaller and less resourced libraries will continue to rely on the “big guys” to collect the fulsome record of human knowledge, and will be able to more efficiently use their limited resources to purchase that which will be relevant and useful to their local community. DDA allows them this luxury. The user is not only “not broken”, but they offer valuable contributions to the library that faces difficult decisions with scarce resources.

Every Book its Reader; Every Reader his Book

Early defences of DDA did have an air of finality about them—remarks such as “being willing to confront the uncomfortable reality that the clock is ticking on the utility of traditional library approaches”¹⁰ by Dennis Dillon, or Sword’s comment that “PDA is the child of academic administrators who have instinctively questioned the need for the immense never-ending blackhole of materials budgets in the face of the need to terminate staff and apply money to rebuilding and building essential infrastructure.”¹¹ Statements such as these, which are easy targets to take out of context¹² don’t exactly strike the balance that a collections librarian in existential crisis would be searching for when learning of this new tool. To wit: Sens and Fonseca (who were guilty of taking the previous Swords quote out of context¹³) opined the “underlying premise that the academic librarian is an unnecessary part of the collections process, that an unfettered collections process is somehow superior to a managed one because it leads to instant statistical gratification.”¹⁴

That said, in the same seminal book (Swords, ed.) on the topic, and in much of the literature, it is consistently noted that DDA programs are not one-size-fit-all, and can (and **should**) be tailored to address various institutional goals. Common criticisms of DDA programs are rife with concern that skewed or homogenous collections¹⁵ will be built with little to no consideration for librarian expertise, depth, breadth and future use. We can address these concerns as follows:

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The Librarian is Still Selecting—They Just Aren't Buying

If there is one major learning outcome to be gained from this paper, let it be this one. That is, the librarian is still very much a part of the selection process. In my library, DDA is just one more order type. It is simply not intended to be the foundation of any collection. John Buschmann's essay "Seven reasons to be skeptical about patron-driven acquisitions" ends with the concession that when used as a tool and not an all-encompassing savior of libraries, PDA will have an "honorable role".¹⁶ The recently published NISO Recommended Practice for Demand Driven Acquisition of Monographs¹⁷ offers guidance in defining the parameters of the program—the first step being the definition of the goals of the program. There are a series of recommendations from NISO on exactly how to establish goals. The first is to acknowledge the flexibility inherent in determining how to best leverage DDA and that different libraries will use DDA in different ways. No two libraries are the same and no two implementations will be the same. Granted, there are libraries that will choose very loosely defined and unmediated approaches, but the point is that they don't have to. A DDA program is only as strong and effective as the intellectual work that has gone into its design. This is no small task; the time and effort invested in the design of a DDA program could be its strongest indicator of success.

DDA management requires knowledge of cataloging, invoicing, EDI (electronic data interchange) ordering, approval plan structure, LC classification, budget management, record management, and supervisory skills to train staff and assist them as they cope with the ambiguity that general ebook management presents. This is nicely summarized in Dempsey's paper on the future of collecting and collections: "Analytics has become central, and the connections between usage, management, and purchasing/licensing decisions will become firmer as intelligent workflows are connected to networks of shared data about resources, usage, and people."¹⁸ In the case of DDA, this future that is described is already here.

"Defend the Right to Read and Get Out of the Way"¹⁹

Does the librarian really know best? At its core, we can all agree that DDA allows for a broader selection of material for the user. In *The Library of Babel*, Borges writes of the notion of the Infinite Library, and that "When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure", but as the story unfolded, "As was natural, this inordinate hope was followed by an excessive depression. The certitude that some shelf in some hexagon held precious books and that these precious books were inaccessible seemed almost intolerable."²⁰ The notion that librarians are "the priest of the book"²¹ and have the power to influence the canon of their particular discipline (or, indeed of human knowledge as with Umberto Eco's Jorge the Librarian—the anti-hero of the library who would rather see the library burned to the ground than accessible to the outsider)²² encourages us to look beyond our own constructs in collection development. Hur-Li Lee, in her study of collection development as a social process found that "social history and personal ideologies are unavoidably influential in collection development" and encourages librarians to work toward building interdisciplinary collections through the exploration of the unfamiliar.²³ What better way to disrupt the "hegemony of the canon"²⁴ than through the involvement of the user?

Granted, the Infinite Library—that is the library that contains everything, in effect contains nothing—"the Library is endless and cyclical"²⁵, but in the age of the networked world, I submit that the user has a much better chance of narrowing down their topic when searching a catalogue containing enriched DDA records, rather than the endless loop of searching of the modern Infinite Library (i.e. Google).

The advent of the web shifted has design principles from 'transaction before usability' to 'usability before transaction'.²⁶ Similarly with DDA, users are able to judge the suitability of the book before getting it "home". We know that very little searching starts

at the library website²⁷, therefore we can assume that much of the exploratory phase of the research process has already happened prior to the researcher's arrival at the catalogue. Lee states, "Well designed collection structures and interconnections among various levels of collections will no doubt be beneficial to these users."²⁸ Why not increase their choice in the library environment? As so eloquently put by Jeffrey Garrett in his study of the librarian in *The Name of the Rose*, "Everything is potentially valuable or worthless, depending on its position in the temporary contexts that we create for our library searches, what we then make of it, and at what point in our search we move which way."²⁹ In that light, the temporary context that is a library search is hardly a stalwart establishment upon which we should stake our *raison d'être*. We do not create those contexts, they are shaped by the user and composed of what we make available.

Homogenous Collections are Already the Status Quo (and are Bankrupting Us)

The suggestion that DDA is the Amazonification (or corporatization) of libraries may be familiar. It's even been suggested that somehow publishers and vendors have the ability to make their backlist offerings appear higher in a search ranking.³⁰ Given the actual technicalities behind how DDA works, this would be impossible. The truth is that users have no idea if a title is owned by a library or not—this is made invisible to them. Also missing from the dialogue on DDA is the possibility for the resurrection of older titles that may have been missed because they are past their prime. The lifecycle of the scholarly monograph is a short one. DDA gives a second life to backlists by virtue of their potential discovery. A recent study found that the visibility of older articles in search engines has led to an increase in their citations.³¹ This is a refreshing cause for optimism, particularly for what is usually a fairly bleak dialogue on the slow demise of the traditional university press.

Criticisms that DDA is a crude marketing tool conveniently ignore the alternatives—which, in my opinion, are far more egregious. In the world of ebook

purchasing in libraries, the choices are relatively limited. As premised at the beginning of this paper, I am not attempting to debate the merits of including ebooks in library collections—for better or worse, ebooks are here to stay and we need to figure out how best to acquire them. Librarians have three choices:

1. Demand driven acquisitions
2. Title by title ordering or e-approval plans via book jobber/vendor
3. Publisher direct packages

An ideal setup would be a combination of the first and second choices. The second choice used alone is incredibly time consuming (more on that in next section), and perhaps does not provide as much choice for the user. The third option, packages from publishers, is a major point of concern for three reasons: their costs are becoming completely unsustainable, their cost per use questionable, and finally, they prejudice a library's holdings to one publisher. Walters expresses concern that DDA runs the risk of creating uniformity among research library collections.³² Take, for example, the consortium Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL). OCUL has been negotiating ebook packages from publishers for years. This means that participating members in the province are purchasing the exact same content from the exact same publisher. If that's not a homogenous collection (worth a great deal of money to the publisher) then what is it? If the same titles were purchased via DDA across the same libraries we'd be assured they are actually needed and used; in this case each library relied on the publisher to choose on our behalf. I propose it is more likely that we would have collectively built more robust collections had we allowed for user collaboration, rather than all purchase the exact same titles.

Furthermore, these packages have been rising steadily in price, year after year. When publishers are questioned about cost increases, the responses invariably point to an increase in the number of titles. Sound familiar? Ebook packages are *The Big Deal Part II*³³. As previously mentioned, not all libraries need to collect everything. I submit that widespread adoption of ebook package purchasing is false economy both

in terms of encouraging inflation and in sunk costs at the local level.

If DDA is a disruptive technology for the collections librarian, it has the potential to be fundamentally altering for publishers as more and more libraries move away from package deals. A relatively unexplored option known as “evidenced based acquisition” aims to combine the benefits of purchasing directly from the publisher (namely DRM-free content that is owned rather than leased via an aggregator) and the cost-effectiveness of DDA. Perhaps much of the reluctance to embrace DDA is due to conflation of common issues with ebooks, namely the transient nature of their ownership and DRM-related usage problems. If this can be overcome with an evidence-based model whereby the publisher is guaranteed a certain amount of revenue and the library is not obliged to purchase what is not used based on mutually agreed upon parameters, it could be a scenario where both parties are satisfied.

Firm ordering title by title, whether in print or ebook, employ traditional methods of selection. These may involve peer ranking, accreditation standards, Research Library Conspectus validation and book reviews. As Doherty states, “Standards perpetuate a static canon.” He suggests that “Librarians can force the canon to evolve and become more inclusive in, for example, areas of gender, race, non-Western cultures and religion.”³⁴ If we are truly active participants in the education of our users, then we must accept that part of that is providing choice for research materials that are beyond our worldview; we can learn from the selections they make just as they can learn from the selections we offer. DDA can assist with that. In the meantime, the collections librarian is able to focus more fully on further canon evolution. After all...

The Library is a Growing Organism

Simply put, the selection of commodity collections (defined as those that are widely available for purchase) is not a good use of the professional librarians’ time. Access management is the new collection development. In the ever evolving academy as it becomes

part of a digital network environment, there is so much more opportunity for the skillset of the collections librarian. Dempsey, et. al explore what this shift in skillset may look like:

To increase operational efficiencies, library workflows will need to be more intelligent and data-aware, using demand-side usage data to trigger acquisitions, collection balancing between institutions, triage for digitization, consolidation in shared print environments, transfer or withdrawal decisions, and so on.³⁵

Closer focus on preservation, research data management, linked data and scholarly communications becomes more in reach as time previously spent on the traditional tasks become more automated and managed, rather than performed individually. This changes drives a “deeper engagement with the research and learning behaviours of the institution and individual researchers.”³⁶

Much has been said about the growing importance of special collections to the academic library. Rick Anderson’s impactful piece, *Can’t Buy Us Love*, discussed a potential future where commodity collections are a thing of the past (if open access is eventually realized) and the academic library’s value lay in the unique collections they organize, curate and preserve.³⁷ There is a lot of hope in such an idea. Imagine a world where the librarian no longer focuses on mass market materials and instead becomes intimately familiar with previously undiscovered areas of study? To me, this is by far the more exciting potential for building research collections for the future in the growing organism that Ranganathan envisioned so long ago. New tools provide the ability to hone our practice, create richer interdisciplinary collections, and an opportunity to exponentially expand the reach of librarian expertise, depth, breadth in collection development.

Notes

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