

THE DEFAULT LIBRARY AND THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE: PERSONAL SERVICE DESIGN AND DELIVERY IN A VIRTUAL SERVICE AGE

Jennifer Cram

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BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Cram is Manager, Library Services, Education Queensland. Jenny was ALIA National President in 1993, Queensland Special Librarian of the Year in 1996 and received a Minister for Education's Leadership Award. Jenny is widely published and has been a keynote speaker at many international and national conferences.

ABSTRACT

Paper discusses the extent to which library technicians have control over the quality of service delivery and demonstrates that tools useful for systemic analysis of service design and delivery can be usefully and extremely effectively applied at the individual level. Differing and apparently unrelated concepts are explored including: the idea of the default library extrapolated from work done in lexical cartography, the veil of ignorance conception of justice as fairness developed by philosopher John Rawls, Gap analysis adapted from Parasuraman, Zeithamel and Berry, and personal performance measurement. The significance of linkages between these concepts for both service design and service delivery and their impact on both face-to-face and online service delivery is highlighted. The gap analysis model is examined both from the perspective of the potential contribution of library technicians to the service processes identified in the model and the responsibility of those actively delivering service to monitor and address gaps on an ongoing basis. Paper concludes that library technicians can make a significant contribution to the quality of a library's service delivery, both face-to-face and online, if their personal approach to their work is sophisticated and multi-dimensional, and their personal performance measurement regime is focused on value and impact.

INTRODUCTION

To identify the extent to which an individual can have an impact on service quality requires thoughtful examination of the environment in which we operate and the assumptions we make, together with imaginative consideration of currently available tools for systematic analysis of service design and delivery.

We talk about service quality as if we know what it is, but it is a construct that is neither easy to explicate nor easy to assess (Monroe & Krishnan 1983 cited in Molhotra et al 1994). Library service quality is not an absolute. Largely it is a construct of the individual user (Browne & Edwards 1992) because most libraries favour the constituency satisfaction model of organisation effectiveness and therefore regard service quality to be whatever users are satisfied with.

But user satisfaction and the quality of outcomes is impacted by user competence in specifying information needs and in adding value to the information received. When the library uses information objects and staff skills to respond to a user requirement, the library's proportionate intellectual output is wholly dependent on the proportionate intellectual input of the library user. When the library provides information to a user, that user adds value by evaluating the information presented in the context of his or her personal knowledge, experience, and judgement. User competencies impact on user satisfaction, and user

perceptions directly determine evaluation of the services users consume. Users judge whether service quality is appropriate, but it is the perceptions of library staff that most directly affect service design and service delivery (Brown & Swartz 1989).

Figure 1 highlights the very individual nature of library service both from the perspective of the service provider and that of the user.

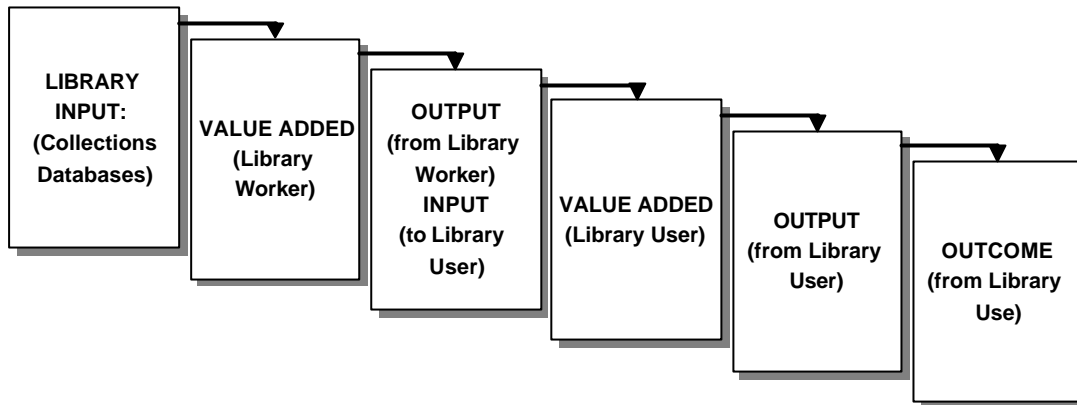


Figure 1: Library Information Services Value Chain

Library user and library worker input and competencies are not the only factors that affect service quality. The quality of the library service a user experiences derives also from three complex sets of interacting variables. These three sets of variables can be broadly categorised as Environmental, Technical and Attitudinal.

- Environmental variables, which include both the narrower (library) and wider (community) environment, comprise external environmental conditions, internal management style and organisational culture.
- Technical variables, which play a critical role in facilitating or hindering quality service delivery, comprise the quality of information technology, library infrastructure and facilities, and the performance measurement regime.
- Attitudinal variables, which comprise the assumptions, values, beliefs and expectations of every library worker and every library user.

The interaction between environmental and technical variables has a profound impact on our capacity to design and deliver services in both virtual and the face-to-face modes, and on our capacity to understand the contradictions inherent in our attempts to provide personal service in a virtual service age. In addition, the interaction between environmental and technical variables impacts on our capacity to understand the structures of our thought and our ways of perceiving reality. Hence the interaction between these two sets of variables has a profound impact on the third, the attitudinal variables. In turn, attitudinal variables impact on our perception of what we are in the business of, what we do, and of our capacity to deliver high quality service within existing environmental and technical constraints.

A library technician probably has little or no control over technical variables and no capacity to influence the wider environment. But we all have the capacity to examine our own attitudes and to examine, understand and contribute to the library's response to these variables and to user needs. Two concepts have helped me in these tasks and have therefore informed my thinking on virtual service delivery. These are the Default Library, borrowed from the field of

lexical cartography and the Veil of Ignorance, which comes from the field of social justice policy.

THE DEFAULT LIBRARY

Language is testimony embodying historical evidence of values and events. In order to test our assumptions about libraries and library services we must look at the relationship between the language we use and the idea of the library. This is probably most efficiently explained by analogy.

Lexical cartographer Jay Arthur argues that those of us who are English-speaking Australians live in two countries: the country of our language and the country of our existence, and that there are many aspects of the latter for which we do not have adequate words. She demonstrates that our Australian English dictionaries show that Australian English, is the language of this “default country”. For instance, in English, the word *river* suggests something full of water, flowing to the sea, and Australian dictionaries echo this view. So our dictionaries preclude rivers being places upon which you can camp and light fires. As a result in the literature on Australia the term *river* is used with qualifications such as *not a legitimate river* and rivers that flow year round are labelled *permanent*. *Drought* is another word that confirms Australia as hostile and defective, even though what we call drought is often more normal than what we call a normal year. The default setting of our language reads the normal as abnormal, exceptional, peculiar, possibly wrong and needing remediation (Lingua Franca, 1999).

On one level it would be comforting to imagine that we still share a mental image of the library as a civic forum of free enquiry. However, sufficient empirical evidence exists to suggest that there is a continuum of default libraries operating in the heads of people at every level of influence and that this continuum ranges from the ‘everything is on the Internet’ model to the ‘rubber stamp and dusty old books’ model. Among library strategists, the default library appears to be the virtual library, yet we still operate in hybrid mode which means that a significant proportion of library use is by individual persons, in hardcopy format, and for entertainment. Virtual services are largely information services. Virtual services represent a quantum shift. We are no longer dealing with individual needs. How individuals use information has become almost immaterial.

Society acknowledges that access to information is a public good, that is, something anyone can utilise without making it unattractive for others to do so, but there is also conflict caused by the economic view that information is valuable because it is a potential source of profit. There is a difference between supporting *individuals* and supporting *individualism* with a focus on economic prosperity. The *individual* to whom we deliver our information services is now not a *person*, but a *community of practice or interest*, which may be defined as a set of people who occupy analogous structural locations in a society (Agre 1977). How communities of practice or interest use information and what information those communities require drives the development and provision of online information. Information technologies allow communities to think together. In designing and delivering services we need to consider how such communities actively conduct their collective cognition and what role of libraries and of individual library workers might play in supporting this collective cognition.

It has been suggested that users have roles that they need to learn, with user participation being improved through a process of organisational socialisation (Westwood & Ager 1999). Where service targets are communities of practice it is the library that needs to go through a

process of community of practice/community of interest socialisation. Individual library staff members are critical to this process. To move beyond information provision to an active process of collective cognition in communities requires that we use personal knowledge to understand particular communities of practice or interest from the inside, that we focus on user outcomes and that we develop and apply methods for determining which persons are affected by our services, their place in the initial distribution, and what their gains are when they use our services.

THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

In order to focus on outcomes for our users we need to use personal knowledge to understand particular communities of practice or interest from the inside. This is an appropriate role for a library technician. It has been a long time since libraries could fulfil all the multiple roles individuals might require of them and since balanced and unbiased library collections were achievable. We need to be more precise about the bias of our collections and services and we need to be considering distributions of outcomes. We need to move away from the ‘no morals, no politics, no religion’ catchcry – the library interpretation of the device of a veil of ignorance first proposed by the philosopher, John Rawls (1999) as a way of addressing social justice as a whole. In making decisions regarding public policy, Rawls suggested we should place ourselves behind a veil of ignorance, that is ignore ourselves, our abilities and our social position, so that we will not know if we will be the beneficiaries or the victims of institutional or social biases, and therefore our decisions will be unbiased.

The veil of ignorance focuses on mean impacts, assuming that the position of any particular individual in one distribution should be treated as irrelevant (Carneiro 2002). Whether the library user is categorised as an individual, or as a person who is a member of a community of practice or interest, or as a community of practice or interest as an entity, that representative agent paradigm is a poor approximation to reality. The marginal entrant into a social program (in our case a library service) is often different from the average participant (Heckman 2001) and people not only differ in their responses they also act on those differences.

We can now begin to see how important it is to understand these communities, how necessary it is to understand the role of personal knowledge in our perception of library service quality and alignment with user needs to put the content back into library practice. This will also aid in understanding that the environmental and technical variables applying in a particular library impact on service quality. But we also need tools and a framework within which to systematically identify and address quality issues, and these can be found in the retail sector.

TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS OF SERVICE DESIGN AND DELIVERY

A number of retail sector models and tools, designed to assist management to convey its expectations of how staff will deliver service, and to assess aggregated service quality, can be used by the library to model a particular service from the user’s perspective as well as to prioritise aspects of the service on which to develop standards. They can also be very powerful when used as a theoretical personal behavioural benchmark and a point of reference for staff input into service design and delivery.

The Service Triangle Model

The most basic of these tools, the Service Triangle model (Albrecht & Bradford, 1990) reinforces the need for a service strategy built on knowledge of the user, appropriate personnel and appropriate systems. Although designed to be a framework for organisational level strategy and resource allocation, it is a useful framework to integrate a number of other

customer service models and tools into a coherent tool-kit for personal as well as organisational use. These models, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, Flores' model of basic workflow, the Concrete Moments of Truth Model, the Cycle of Service and the Gaps Model facilitate analysis of the components of the Service Triangle Model. (See Fig 2 for a spatial representation of the areas of the Service Triangle addressed by these other models).

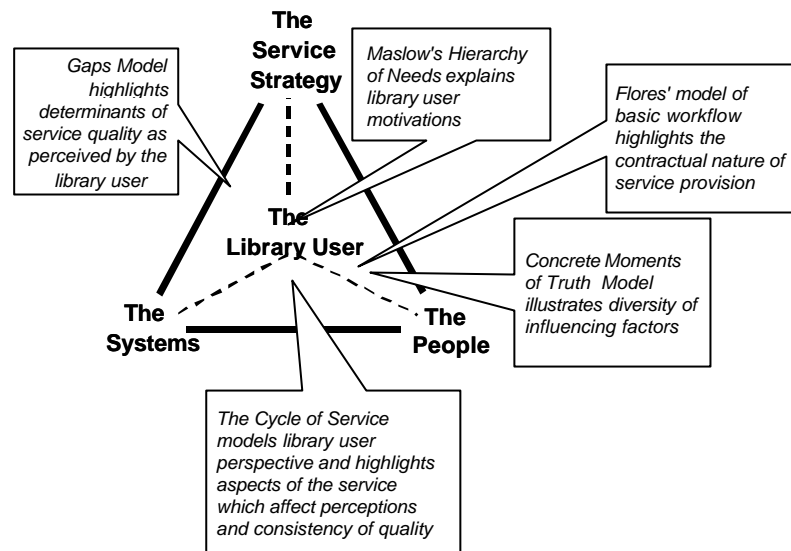


Figure 2: The Service Triangle as a Framework for Utilising Other Models

In many ways the Service Triangle is a statement of the obvious. The customer is central and his or her service experience is defined by the service strategy, the systems in place, and the people involved in delivering the service. Delivering services on line complicates assessment of the user end of any transaction. Due to technical, privacy and manpower limitations, most libraries lack the capacity to know with any precision who is using what, how they are using it, and what their problems and frustrations are. In this environment staff observations acquire added importance. Library workers have to both deliver the service and be surrogate users in identifying problems with service delivery and quality.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Adapted for Library Services

Fundamental needs, such as the need for security, esteem and justice, shape user behaviour (Schneider & Bowen 1995). Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs may usefully be adapted (Powers 1997) to highlight the implications of basic user needs for service design and delivery (See Fig 3). This adaptation also identifies issues to which we need to pay attention when considering our own performance and issues on which user satisfaction data may usefully be collected. Most importantly, it contextualises user motivations and provides guidelines for both design and delivery of services.

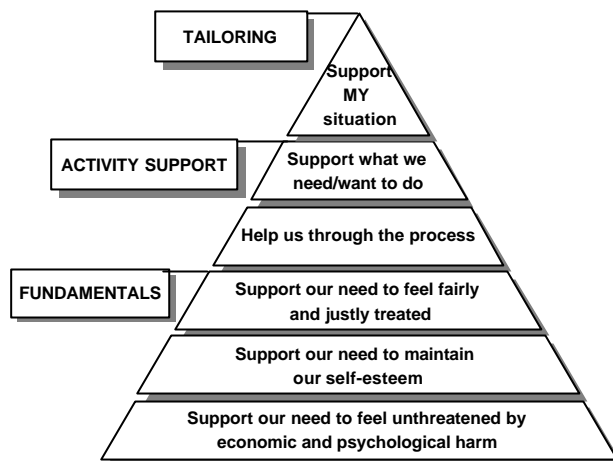


Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Adapted for Library Services

Basic Service Workflow

Flores' (1993) model of basic service workflow (See Fig 4) is a universal model, independent of communication technologies. It is therefore useful as a way of mapping the cycle of service in a situation where variables are introduced by differing methods of access to the service. It also highlights the contractual nature of many library services, emphasises that people coordinate the transactions that lead to user satisfaction, and clarifies that even after the information requirement is agreed upon and produced users may find it does not really meet their needs. Most particularly, it is a reminder that delivery of service depends on articulation of a request by a user. In a face-to-face situation, the reference interview assists. Where the services are online, those services are provided in anticipation of certain user requests. Once again the library worker needs to mindfully act as a surrogate user and identify issues and ensure they are addressed.

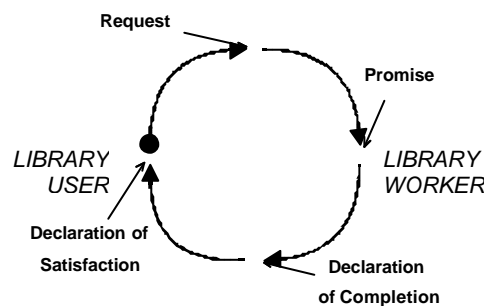


Figure 4: Basic Service Workflow

Moment of Truth Model

Albrecht and Bradford's (1990) concrete moment of truth model (See Fig 5) illustrates the diversity of influencing factors. It clarifies that the service context is the collective impact of all the social, physical and psychological elements that happen during the moment of truth and highlights the need for congruence between context, user frame of reference, and the staff member's frame of reference. In a virtual environment we have to be able to model both frames of reference in order to ensure online offerings meet user needs.

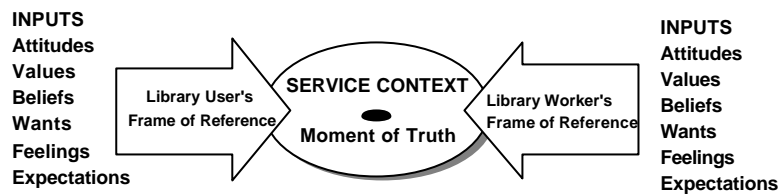


Figure 5: Moment of Truth Model

Gaps Model

The Gaps model is a conceptual model that highlights four gaps in the control of the library that may affect service quality as perceived by the user. It is predicated on the assumption that users use basically similar criteria in evaluating service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985) and that their assessment of your service will depend on a comparison between users' expectations and their perceptions of the service actually delivered. It highlights four gaps in the control of the library that may affect service quality as perceived by the user.

There are two ways of defining expectations. The satisfaction literature views expectations as *predictions* made by users about what is likely to happen during an impending transaction. The service quality literature views expectations as desires or wants of consumers, what they feel a service provider *should*, rather than *would*, offer (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1988). In delivering library services we need to understand both, hence the importance of the observations, knowledge and input of the staff.

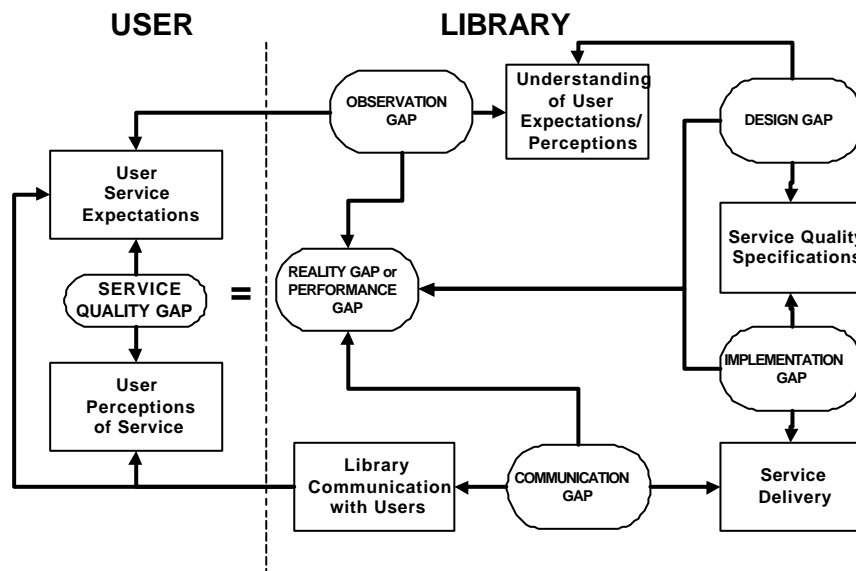


Figure 6: Service Gap Model Adapted for Library Services

So, using a Gaps model to examine the perceptions of both parties involved in the service encounter allows a more thorough understanding of service quality. In particular, as well as the Service Quality Gap, we need to examine gaps between user expectations and our perceptions of those expectations, and user experience and our perceptions of those experiences. This combination of perspectives can provide valuable additional insights into areas where change is needed. All gaps impact on service quality. The four gaps on the library

side of the equation highlight deficiencies and issues in design, implementation and marketing of services, issues which every library worker has a responsibility to monitor, and to address by bringing them to the attention of management.

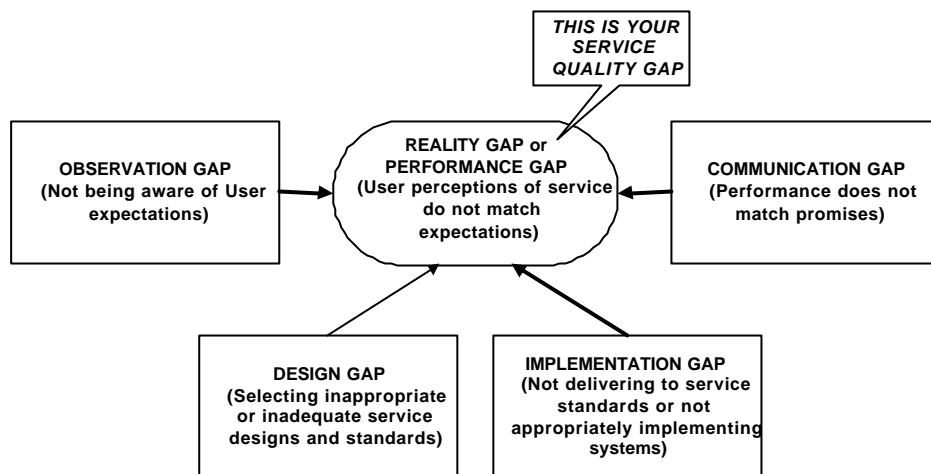


Figure 7: All Gaps Impact on Service Quality

The best-designed system will fail if it is badly implemented; the perfectly implemented system will fail if it is badly designed. Few libraries have a structured program to gather personal observations of staff on a transactional basis, yet those observations are a rich source of information. Obviously, library workers require appropriate tools and an environment conducive to effective service delivery, but personal performance is also crucial to quality service. Being conscious of your performance and willing to deliberately use what you observe in influencing management, is what makes the difference. The Gaps Model also provides a framework for self-assessment against user surveys. When the library conducts a user survey fill out one yourself from the point of view of how you think the users will respond. Then compare with your responses with the survey results and plot them against the various types of gap to identify your own assumptions.

PERSONAL PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

One of the most powerful tools any individual worker can develop is a personal performance measurement regime. I emphasise that this is a personal tool and not something that you need to share with anyone unless you choose to. What is important is that you assess your performance and take action to remedy deficiencies.

Organisational level performance measurement assesses system performance and therefore cannot assist you to assess your own performance, cannot ensure that you personally are delivering value, and cannot ensure that your delivery of service has positive impact on library users.

At the organisational level the motivation for performance measurement is political, concentrating on being able to provide a good report card and focussed on obtaining funding and support from the parent body, or management, concentrating on obtaining a fuller picture. There are also two types of performance measurement: workload or flow performance measurement, and value and impact performance measurement. In the former the quantity of transactions is the measure of success, in the latter quantity is less important than ensuring the right information gets to the right people at the right time because the library's value is judged

according to perception of actual or potential benefit. On a personal level, the motivation for performance measurement is to be the best you can be by asking, and answering, a number of questions on a regular basis:

- What would my performance look like if it were optimised?
- What is my current performance?
- What is the cost to my library and its users if my performance is sub-optimal?
- What are the possible causes of sub-optimal performance and therefore what do I need to measure?
- What do I have to do to close the gap?

To answer these questions you need to gather performance data. The best kind of performance data has a number of characteristics:

- It is ongoing, so you need to constantly assess your own performance and document and contribute your personal observations of user requirements.
- It is specific. “You’re wonderful” may make us feel good, but it is not usable feedback and needs to be probed.
- It is timely. Daily transaction data needs to be documented, accumulated and reported frequently.
- It is focussed, so you need a clear idea about what is important to know.
- It is weighted, so you need to understand what your library believes about how its activities add value for its intended beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

You cannot change your system if you do not understand it. What can be measured can be understood. What can be understood can be altered. It is important to understand and, where necessary, adapt individual performance. To understand individual performance we need also to understand the communities of practice or interest we serve. It is also necessary to understand the role of personal knowledge in our perception of library service quality and alignment with user needs, to put the content back into library practice and to understand that the precise nature of the environmental and technical variables applying in a particular library impacts on service quality. We cannot achieve those goals without tools and a framework within which to systematically identify and address quality issues.

Of necessity management focuses on strategic capabilities and resource transferabilities. To succeed management needs to capture individual capabilities and motivate the entire organisation to respond co-operatively to a complicated and dynamic environment. The data you gather by observing user behaviour and measuring your own performance can contribute significantly to the quality of a library’s service delivery, both face-to-face and online because you can emphasise user requirements and provide experience-based norms which may be more appropriate than expectations to serve as a benchmark against which user experiences are compared (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987).

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