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RISKY BUSINESS

**Taking and Managing Risks in
Library Services for Teens**

Linda W. Braun, Hillias J. Martin, and Connie Urquhart



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**Linda W. Braun, Hillias J. Martin, and Connie Urquhart
For the Young Adult Library Services Association**

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The risk-taking librarians who filled out our survey online and talked to us via e-mail are also an amazing group of people. You can read more about these librarians throughout the book and read more of what they have to say in appendix A.

Four great young adult (YA) authors—Ellen Hopkins, Barry Lyga, Lauren Myracle, and Alex Sanchez—were kind enough to tell us their risk stories, several of which made us *verklemt* as we read about their commitment to taking risks in order to support the needs and interests of teens.

The YALSA Blog was an incredible resource as we researched this book, and many blog authors are quoted in the pages. Thanks to all of the YALSA bloggers for the time and commitment they put into getting out content to the wide array of readers that check out the blog on a regular basis.

It's clear from the work of the librarians and authors who are quoted within these pages that there is a lot of risky business going on in libraries today.

INTRODUCTION

A Risky Theme

Librarianship is a risky profession. Who knew?

The idea for this book is the result of several discussions of members of YALSA's 2009–2010 Presidential Advisory Task Force.¹ This group worked to develop the theme and programming for the presidential year of one of this book's authors, Linda W. Braun. Continually the discussions of the group focused on two ideas. One was that librarians often struggle with trying things out, admitting that their efforts weren't as successful as originally hoped, and using what was learned from a trial project in order to improve a program or service. This ended up being called the "I F@&!d up and then I fixed it" theme among task force members.

The second theme, labeled "Risky Business," centered on the idea that much of what a teen librarian has to do in her job is risky. The Presidential Advisory Task Force talked about materials in the collection, such as adding books with explicit sex scenes. They discussed programs that might be risky, such as giving teens the chance to manage a program for younger children. And they talked about the risks inherent in almost any spontaneous conversation a librarian and teen have. For example, how does a librarian respond to a teen who asks about the best way to handle an abusive relationship?

It was clear too to task force members that the "I F@&!d up and then I fixed it" philosophy is a component of librarian risk taking. Librarians

are very happy to provide best practices and show how their programs, services, collections, and so forth succeed. But when do we see published and lauded examples of worst practices? Very rarely, and that's because it's pretty risky to say to the world, "I F@&!d up." But talking about worst practices is a risk worth taking, because it can actually help librarians be even more successful in their own libraries. The best practices show what works; the worst practices show how to get to what works. The combination is what helps librarians succeed.

The *Risky Business* theme struck a strong chord with members of the task force because it was clear through their discussions that so much of what a teen librarian does every day includes an element of risk. And the group realized that sometimes, because of a fear of risk taking, librarians don't always take the extra step in order to serve teens as well as they should. With that, the YALSA 2009–2010 presidential theme was launched and a component of that theme is this book.

WHAT'S IN A BOOK ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF RISKY TEEN SERVICES

Risky Business is task force members Connie, Jack, and Linda's way of ferreting out many of the risky topics that were discussed during conversations among the full group. It also gives librarians and authors who are risk takers the chance to tell a bit about their endeavors—specifically in this book:

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the many reasons why teen librarians should be risk takers. It includes information on why teens need to have opportunities to see adults as risk takers, how risk taking can help teens to grow up successfully, how risk is an important part of teen advocacy, and how innovation in teen services requires a commitment to risk.

Every day librarians purchase materials for their collections that are no doubt risky. A key feature of chapter 2 is a set of risky collection development scenarios with suggestions for how to successfully manage the risk within the areas covered. There is even a breakdown of the level of risk involved within each scenario with low-, medium-, and high-risk options for different collection development situations.

Librarians definitely need to be willing to take risks when selecting materials for their collections. But authors who write books for teens

take their own risks when developing plots, themes, and characters that might be controversial. Four authors (Ellen Hopkins, Barry Lyga, Lauren Myracle, and Alex Sanchez) contributed to chapter 3 about the risks each has taken when writing for teens. The authors also discuss why it's important for librarians to purchase risky materials for their collections.

The opening paragraph of chapter 4 states, "Programming for teens in libraries is a great way to tie all aspects of teen librarianship into one (or two, or three, or more) amazing event. It encompasses nearly all the work teen librarians do: talking with teens, building collections, mobilizing staff expertise, planning, advertising, and more." To create amazing events with and for teens, librarians need to be smart about taking risks but not shy away from them. Learn how to do that in this chapter.

Because many librarians did not grow up with technology as a part of their day-to-day lives, sometimes integrating any technology into services for teens can seem very risky. Chapter 5 offers guidance on risk taking with social media, technology collaborations, and filtering. It also provides information on how to include technology components into traditional services, such as booktalks, information literacy instruction, and book discussion groups.

Sometimes the reason why librarians don't take teen services risks is that working with administration to gain needed support can be scary and a risk in itself. Chapter 6 examines barriers related to selling risk to administration and how to take positive steps in effectively gaining administrative support.

The authors of *Risky Business* have taken risks in their careers. In chapter 7, each tells his or her risky stories and provides ideas on how to be smart when considering career moves that might very well be risky.

In 2004, Students Against Destructive Decisions reported that teens who take positive risks are more likely to steer clear of negative risk taking.² Read chapter 8 to learn more about why it's important to give teens the opportunity to be risk takers and read about teens who have been successful as risk takers.

Each chapter includes quotes from librarians who have taken risks as a part of their service to teens.

The appendixes of *Risky Business* include decision-making tools to help determine what is needed to begin smart risk taking in the library. The resource list highlights articles and websites about risk in libraries, risk management, and teens and risk taking. In addition, the appendixes

offer YALSA's competencies for serving youth and YALSA's white papers, which discuss the importance of teen literature, the need to include young adult services in library school curricula, the need for dedicated teen space in public libraries, and the need for dedicated teen services staff in public libraries.

IN THE END

The authors hope that readers of this book can use the contents to begin taking smart, successful risks in library teen services. But perhaps more than that, the authors hope readers will be ready, willing, and able to stand up to the challenges of risk taking. Library teen services is risky business. If the librarians who serve teens aren't willing to be risky, then teens are not being served in the way they deserve.

NOTES

1. Members of the 2009–2010 Presidential Advisory Task Force were Frances Jacobson Harris, librarian, University Laboratory High School (Urbana, Illinois); Lisa Lindsay, teen librarian, Fresno County (California) Library; Jack Martin, assistant director for public programs and lifelong learning, the New York Public Library; Jamie Mayo, Kansas City (Missouri) Public Library; Becky Mazur, librarian, South Hadley (Massachusetts) High School; and Connie Urquhart, teen services coordinator, Fresno County (California) Library.
2. Glenn Greenberg and Deborah Burke Henderson. "Positive Risk Taking Cuts Alcohol and Drug Use Among Teens," SADD Teens Today, November 29, 2004, www.sadd.org/teensoday/survey04.htm.

1

The What and Why of Risk Taking in Teen Services

The word “risk” refers, often rather vaguely, to situations in which it is possible but not certain that some undesirable event will occur.

“Risk,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

That definition states very succinctly what makes the idea of taking risks frightening to many librarians. It’s not easy to make a decision if that decision will lead to something unpleasant. Everyone prefers to make decisions that are certain to bring good consequences. For example, it’s fairly easy to decide to help a teacher collect resources for an upcoming unit; the risks in doing that are most likely pretty minuscule. But it’s more difficult perhaps to decide to have a conversation with teens in the library about decisions related to smoking, drinking, or sex. Those discussions can be pretty risky, as a teen librarian could worry that a parent, or administrator, would hear of the discussion and question its value within the library setting.

When working with teens in a library, however, risk is a natural and important part of the job. A librarian who doesn’t take on the challenge of risk taking in teen services could very well not be serving the teen

population successfully. As YALSA past president Michael Cart said in an interview about risk in teen services, “I think anybody who elects YA librarianship as a profession is demonstrating risky behavior.”

An Interview with Michael Cart

Q. What did Risky Business for young adult librarians look like ten years ago?

A. It wasn’t a pretty picture! In fact, I chose “Risky Business” as the theme for my 1997–98 YALSA presidential year to focus attention and action on redeeming young adults, young adult literature, and the profession of young adult librarianship from the risks that then threatened to overwhelm them. In articulating these risks in my first presidential message, I quoted then teen activist Danny Seo who, in his book *Generation React*, had written, “Have you noticed? Our generation faces problems that didn’t exist when our parents were our age. So it’s not surprising that many of us feel hopeless about the future.” Some of us in the profession were also feeling a bit hopeless about serving the growing needs of teens, since no more than 11 percent of America’s libraries then employed a young adult librarian. As for the literature, it had been pronounced “near death” as early as 1994 when YALSA held a preconference to examine the health and prospects for the future of this still young genre that seemed to be in imminent danger of extinction.¹

Q. How do you think it’s changed since? What does risk look like now?

A. The situation has changed dramatically for the better, especially for YA literature and YA librarianship. The literature, for the past ten years, has been enjoying a new golden age that shows every indication of continuing for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile YALSA became the fastest-growing division in ALA, while 51.9 percent of America’s libraries now report having at least one full-time librarian devoted to providing young adult service, and teens seem to be taking advantage of this happy circumstance. In

a recent Harris Interactive poll, four out of five teens reported being library users. Unfortunately, the teens themselves continue to lead lives that are no strangers to risk. According to the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, the main threats to adolescents' health are the risky behaviors they themselves choose. Lynn Ponton, author of *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do*, explains, "Adolescents define themselves through rebellion and anger at parents or other adults, engaging in high risk behaviors . . ." Happily, the incidence of many of these risky behaviors seems to be showing a gradual decrease.²

Q. What was the biggest risk you've taken as a young adult librarian?

A. Alas, I was never a young adult librarian; my professional career was spent as a library administrator who was an advocate for youth and youth services, and that's what led me to my involvement with YALSA and, subsequently, with young adult literature. It's my career as a writer and editor that has invited me to take risks, particularly as one who believes we must trust YAs with the truth, no matter how hard-edged. That's why I've tried to be an advocate for unsparing realism in YA literature. I've tried to be true to this in my own books, especially *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth* and *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity*, both of which push the envelope in terms of the frankness of their sexual content.

Q. Have you heard of any risks from young adult librarians that made you raise an eyebrow?

A. I think anybody who elects YA librarianship as a profession is demonstrating risky behavior. The sad truth is that too many people continue to dislike and distrust teens and, by extension, those who advocate for them. After I retired in 1991, I spent some years consulting with libraries and library systems on YA service and the single most common problem I was asked to address was staff reluctance to deal with YAs.

Q. How are libraries aligning themselves to meet the risky needs of the teens who use them?

- A. Following YALSA's lead, I would hope they are focusing on the needs and competencies of YAs instead of only their specific problems. They are also now routinely involving teens in every aspect of service and programming, from planning to execution. They are also developing new collections in new forms, formats, and technologies that change with the needs and habits of YAs. And, I would hope, they are embracing flexibility and being open to new ways of serving the always new needs of their teen populations. As YALSA's recently launched examination of service to older YAs in the later teens and early twenties suggests, libraries are also willing to redefine their service populations to conform with societal realities.

Q. How has risky business in young adult literature changed? What authors are taking the biggest risks now as opposed to ten years ago?

- A. What a good question. For starters, the literature is much more mature and sophisticated in its content than it was a decade or so ago. And I'm not only speaking of a new candor in addressing previously taboo subjects such as sexual abuse, incest, and other edgy topics, but also a new willingness to embrace innovative narrative forms, experimental literary techniques, and character-driven (instead of plot-driven) content. Today's writers are showing a salutary willingness to trust their readers by challenging them with both topics and techniques. Four writers who I think best exemplify this kind of risk taking are M. T. Anderson, Adam Rapp, Philip Pullman, and Aidan Chambers.

Q. What advice would you give young adult librarians and library students who are taking or are about to take risks? What advice would you give their managers?

- A. Talk with, not at, young adults. Be flexible, be fearless, and—believing in what you do—trust your instincts. As for managers: trust your staff and never forget that today's teens are tomorrow's community leaders and potential library advocates.

WHY TEEN SERVICES ARE AND SHOULD BE RISKY

That isn't to say that every risk a teen librarian might take is worth it. But it is important that teen librarians don't go into their work with an aversion to risk. Or that teen librarians don't go into the job thinking it's a nice, cozy, and safe line of work. Instead, teen librarians need to be open to the possibilities of risk and also know how to make good decisions about when to be risky—and when not to be.

WHO TEENS ARE

For many teens, every day is a risky proposition. There is risk in:

- standing up in front of class and presenting a project
- walking into a school social event or party outside of school
- getting up in the morning and deciding what to wear
- letting friends and family members know about sexual orientation
- talking about problems with friends, family, or other adults in the community

The Search Institute's Forty Developmental Assets (see appendix D) provide a good framework for what teens need to grow up successfully. Many of these assets point to the need for teens to learn how to take and manage risks to become successful adults. For example:

The *Boundaries and Expectations* asset includes the importance of *adult role models*. This speaks directly to the need of teens to have adults in their lives who can demonstrate smart and safe behaviors. Teens need to look at adults—say, a librarian—to see how to handle a situation that might be risky, and know how to react if confronted with a similar circumstance.

The *Positive Values* asset states that teens need to take responsibility for their own actions. This isn't something that teens naturally know how to do, although many adults think that it is. It can seem very risky to a teen to take responsibility for something

that didn't go as planned. Teens therefore need opportunities to practice taking responsibility for their actions. They can do that in a variety of ways connected with the library, including managing a library card account, helping to select materials for the collection, and completing tasks as a part of a teen advisory board project.

The *Social Competencies* asset discusses resistance skills and a teen's ability to resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. It can be very risky for a teen to go against the crowd and resist what others are doing and suggesting that she do. Libraries can help teens to gain this asset and learn how to manage associated risks by providing materials that show how to resist peer pressure and activities that provide opportunities to practice taking these kinds of risks within a safe, librarian-managed environment.

For some teens, the library may be the only place in which it's possible to access answers to questions about relationships with the same or the opposite sex. The library might be the only place a teen can go to learn about how to be safe when using social media. Or the library may be the only place where a teen feels comfortable being part of a project in which his ideas are valued. It's important to give teens opportunities to gain assets by giving them the chance to take the risks necessary to do so. (See chapter 8 for more information on teens as risk takers.)

TEEN LIBRARIANS AS ADVOCATES

The authors of the article "Teen Risk Behavior," published by The Ohio State University Extension, state,

As parents, mentors, and role models we are charged with helping teens navigate the complicated landscape of risks and their consequences. We must take this role seriously and make sure that they understand the impacts these behaviors can have on their life.³

Librarians definitely fall into that continuum of adults in the community that need to support teens in "navigating the complicated landscape of risk."

If a librarian working with teens is not able to help teens manage and learn about risks, is she really doing her job? What if a teen is trying to figure out how to tell his parents that he is gay? He goes to the library, hoping there is a novel about a teen like him. He wants to see how another teen managed this type of risk to figure out how he can move forward himself. If the library doesn't have any novels on the topic, what's the teen to do?

While members of the community might feel uncomfortable having materials related to sexual orientation in the collection, should they be the ones to decide what should and shouldn't be included? Do they understand the type of support teens need to make good decisions? Do they think that if a teen can read about sexual orientation in a library book, that they might have to answer a question a teen has about the "scary" topic? Is that a good reason not to provide teens what they need? Who gets to make that decision? It should be the teen librarian who is looking out for the needs of teens in the community first, while at the same time taking the risk and informing community members regularly about why materials are in the collection, how programs are organized, and when discussions are held. (See chapter 2 for information on building risk-worthy collections.)

ASSESSING THE RISK

Of course not all risks that a teen librarian might take to serve teens successfully are smart risks. And, sometimes, a risk might be worth taking, but the time isn't quite right to jump in and do it. It's therefore a good idea to consider these factors when deciding whether to take a risk:

Where does the risk come from? Is it an internal or external risk? In other words, does the risk come from the possibility of going up against the views and ideas of coworkers or administrators (an internal risk)? Is this something that might be risky within the larger community of parents, teachers, and other authority figures (an external risk)? If it's an internal risk, ask, will taking the risk make the working environment nearly impossible to exist in? If an external risk, what will the impact be on overall community support of the library? It's important

to consider where the balance falls when thinking about the value of the risk you might take against the internal discomfort or changes in library community support. If the risk might lead to short-term difficulties but long-term gains, then it could be a risk worth taking.

Who will benefit from the risk? Is the risk something that all teens in the community will benefit from or will it be more of a risk that supports the needs of a small group? Even if it's a small group of teens who gain from the risk taking, is their benefit so great that the risk could be seen as meeting a large need? Because teens are a teen librarian's primary audience, if the risk benefits a large or small group of that audience, the risk needs to be taken seriously. If teens benefit while adults might freak out, consider the value of standing up for the teens and at the same time helping educate adults about the importance of taking risks to serve teens effectively.

What are the benefits of the risk? Will the risk help teens to be healthy and grow up successfully? Will the risk help the library move into providing contemporary services to teens? Will the risk help the library better inform the community about what the library is about and aims to achieve within the community? This is an instance where long-term thinking and big-picture planning should definitely come into play. If the risk under consideration might put the library or the teen librarian in the forefront of a controversy in the community in the short-term, but in the long-term provide the library with greater opportunities for serving teens successfully, maybe it's worth taking. Don't just think about the benefits today, tomorrow, and next week. Think about what the benefits are in six months, a year, or five years, and how those benefits might be turned into even greater opportunities for taking risks and making changes for teens in the community.

What would be the outcome of not taking the risk? If the risk isn't taken, who would lose out? Will the library be seen as unsupportive to teens in the community? Will teens use other resources and venues to get the information, programming, and

services they need? As mentioned previously, remember that teens are the primary audience for library teen services. If not taking the risk means that they are not being served, is not taking that risk more risky than actually taking it? Don't be scared to take a risk if that fear is keeping teens from the best service the library can offer.

Along with considering these factors when determining whether to take a risk, it's also important to think about what to do to manage the risk once a decision is made. Here are some tips for managing risk:

Consider how to limit the risk: Maybe it's a good idea to start small and then build on the first small steps. For example, if implementing social media technology into programs and services is risky because of external concerns, then it might be smart to start with a limited scale project. This could be a project in which the librarian works with a small group of teens using a book service like Goodreads as a Web 2.0 platform for book discussion. As adults in the community see that the Web-based book discussion can be managed safely and successfully in the online social world, the project can be expanded to other social tools and with a larger group of teens.

Make sure to inform, educate, and communicate every step of the way: No matter what the risk is, make sure that all who might be concerned are kept up to date. Keeping something secret makes it seem like the risk is more risky than it actually might be. Being out in the open helps people understand that everything is under control and the project is well thought out.

PERCEIVED VS. ACTUAL RISKS

One thing that holds librarians back when considering risks in the workplace is a perceived sense of risk as opposed to a knowledge of what the actual risks are. For example, consider the librarian who thinks if she sponsors an anime club in the library, then her administration and

community members will be up in arms. Because some people see anime as not much more than watching Saturday morning cartoons, she worries she'll get flack for starting the program at the library.

But this is only a perception of the librarian. She hasn't asked anyone about it. She hasn't brought the idea to the library director. She hasn't talked to parents whom she knows. She hasn't done any research; it's just something she feels in her gut.

These perceived risks are often the result of fears—and it's important that librarians not be taken in by these fears. There is a fear of bringing up a new program or service to administration because an administrator might say “no,” and it's never pleasant to have an idea turned down. Or it could be frightening to bring the topic up because the administrator might ask questions that the librarian can't answer (which, of course, means it's important to do homework before presenting the idea to anyone). And it's scary to start something new that might not go as planned. The teens who promised to attend might not. The equipment for showing anime in the library meeting room might break. A parent might walk in while the program is going on and ask questions. It's true, any of these could take place. But how does the librarian know what the real risks of this program are without talking to people, doing research, and trying things out?

THE ONLY WAY TO BE INNOVATIVE IS THROUGH RISK TAKING

Often perceived risks, rather than actual risks, hinder librarians from serving teens as well as they should. In addition, focusing on perceived rather than actual risks also means librarians aren't as innovative in offering programs and services as they might be. But think about it. Isn't every new program or service a risky proposition? Of course, some are riskier than others, but whatever the innovation—starting a new book discussion group, changing the policy on the number of items a customer can check out at one time, creating a book review blog—change can be risky because it's not clear exactly what the outcome will be.

For some new programs and services, it's easy to take a chance. There might be a lot of teens asking for the new activity, so starting it is easily justifiable. Perhaps the library director says this is something we have

to do, so it gets done. Those are situations that can be seen as very safe risk taking. But what about those times when it's not clear that starting something new is going to be successful or supported by the community and the library administration? That's when it's easy to make excuses to avoid taking a risk. But again, if the risk isn't taken, are teens being served successfully?

Imagine if a library provided the same services, programs, and collections to teens in 2010 as it did in 1950. Would that library really be meeting the needs of contemporary teens? And in the world of Web 2.0, handheld devices, and social networking, a library that doesn't take risks to support teens today is taking the chance that they won't be needed by teens of tomorrow. Perhaps in 1950 innovation and change could come slowly and risks could be minimized. But with all of the opportunities teens have today for finding information, connecting with others, and accessing fiction and nonfiction materials, the library that plays it safe risks losing its credibility and value in the community, and with teens specifically.

Wiktionary includes this definition of the term innovative: "Forward looking; ahead of current thinking." A librarian who is ahead of current thinking definitely needs to be risky. A librarian who serves teens successfully has to think ahead of everyone else to adequately prepare for the emerging needs of teens who live in a world filled with questions, physical and emotional change, and dynamic pop culture.

DON'T WORRY, BETA CAN HELP IN MANAGING RISKS

One of the attributes of the Web 2.0 culture is an understanding that a successful new product doesn't just drop from the sky. More and more businesspeople, educators, librarians, and others are realizing that to be successful, it's important to get feedback from users as a product or service is in development. Did you know that Google's Gmail service maintained a beta label for five years? That label helped users understand that it was a product under development and, as such, was going to change and grow over time. For librarians serving teens, it's possible to use this approach when taking risks in what the library offers.

Perhaps it's time to add urban lit to the library's teen collection. Teens ask for the materials, but the library administration and colleagues

often raise concerns about the materials' language, sexual content, and violence. This is a perfect opportunity to sell the additions to the collection as a beta project. Tell the administration that it's okay to start small to find out how well the materials circulate and the kinds of feedback provided on the inclusion of urban lit in the collection.

It's not necessary to buy every urban lit title available to start the collection. Instead buy a few titles that are certain to be popular with teens. Gather feedback from the teens who check out the materials. After a short period of time, perhaps three months, show the administration the positive comments received about the materials and the circulation numbers (which one can assume are high) for the new additions. Include information about the cost of the materials and how those circulation figures demonstrate that the money is being well spent.

Once it's clear that the collection is successful, then consider expanding on what was originally purchased. Don't just focus on expansion, however; use the beta period as a way to find out what teens are interested in regard to urban lit and what titles and authors might be important to add once the beta period is over. The beta phase should demonstrate how successful the program, service, or collection is and it should also provide information for making changes as the project moves out of beta.

IT'S OK TO MAKE MISTAKES

The beta approach to new and improved programs and services provides librarians with the opportunity to make mistakes and fix them. Promote that new urban lit collection in the library as a beta project. Actively ask for feedback. And just as actively, let teens, administrators, colleagues, and community members know what you learned from the feedback and the changes that will be made as a result. Don't hide from needing to revise. Embrace it. Teens learn from making mistakes and so can you. Consider the beta approach as a way to say, "I messed up but then I fixed it." That sends the message that the library is regularly looking at what it does and how it does it. It sends the message that the library is willing to change to provide the best service possible. It sends the message that the library is willing to admit that sometimes things don't go as well as hoped and planned, but that doesn't mean the institution gives up. It just means that new approaches need to be considered.

If librarians are willing to take risks in teen services to innovate and serve the population successfully, then teens will know they have access to a library that is willing to serve their twenty-first-century needs and that they have access to a staff who is willing to stand up for those needs. Isn't that what libraries and librarians are supposed to do for the entire community?

NOTES

1. For a much more discursive discussion of all of these risk factors, see Michael Cart's *From Romance to Realism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).
2. For more information, see the National Risk Behavior survey, which the Centers for Disease Control conduct every two years among ninth through twelfth grades, www.cdc.gov/yrbss.
3. Kara Newby and Anastasia Snyder, "Teen Risk Behavior," *Family and Consumer Services Fact Sheet*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Extension, <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/pdf/5240.pdf>.

5

Technology A Risk Worth Taking

The risks involved in integrating technology into teen programs and services are many. They range from being willing to embrace social networking technologies and friending teens on those sites, to collaborating with teens on projects virtually, to working within a filtered environment in which teens might not be able to access all the information that they want and need.

Frances Jacobson Harris, a librarian at the University Laboratory High School Library in Urbana-Champaign, found that technology freedoms can both be a benefit and a challenge. She told the authors

I'm a librarian at a public school for three hundred gifted students in grades eight through twelve, ages twelve to eighteen. I also team-teach a required computer literacy course sequence that includes information literacy skills components and ethical and responsible uses of communication and information technologies. Students and staff are given great amounts of personal freedom and responsibility, which can be both liberating and challenging.

In a YALSA-sponsored e-chat in August 2009, Liz Burns, the youth services consultant for the New Jersey State Library's Library for the Blind and Handicapped, said, "With technology, by the time people are comfortable with the risk the technology is so 2005."¹ Unlike risks that are a part of traditional library services, such as book selection, technology

risks can sometimes be more challenging because those working with teens may be learning about new technology at the same time they are trying to integrate that technology into programs and services. As a result, it's not often possible to inform administrators and colleagues about all of the benefits (and pitfalls) of the technology until during, or even after, the technology has been implemented. That's risky. But if the pros and cons of going with a new technology before knowing everything about it, and w-a-i-t-i-n-g until all the pieces are weighed, the conclusion should be that waiting is a risk that will almost always lead to failure. By the time decisions are made, the technology won't be of interest any more, or may have changed so much that the research process needs to start over. However, if librarians are willing to take the risk and learn along the way, then failure is less of a certainty.

This chapter takes a look at some of the technology risks librarians working with teens have already taken, discusses why taking technology risks is worth the gamble, and provides some tips and tricks for being successful when considering, or implementing, a risky technology program or service.

THE RISKS OF GOING SOCIAL

Sarah Ludwig, head of teen and technology services for Darien Library in Connecticut, stated in a YALSA Blog post that

When I learned that my Facebook presence was going to be included in the library's monthly e-newsletter, along with my Twitter, MySpace, and AIM accounts, I realized it would be pretty embarrassing for someone to visit my profile and see that I didn't actually have any friends from my community. So I took a plunge. I started friending kids. I included a note; you can do this on FB. The note said something like: "Hi, I'm the teen librarian at the Darien Library and I'm trying to get to know people in Darien. I know you don't know me, so if you don't want to accept me as a friend, I totally understand! But if you do, that would be great."²

For many librarians, friending teens in a Web-based social networking environment is risky. They worry that friending a teen might cross boundaries of personal space, both for the teen and the librarian. Being a teen's friend on Facebook, for example, might mean that a librarian will

know more about that teen than she feels comfortable with. Librarians ask, “What if a teen posts something on her wall that lets me know she’s up to an activity that I don’t think is smart and safe? I don’t want to be involved in a teen’s life in that way, and I wouldn’t have to worry about it if I don’t become her Facebook friend.”

But as Sarah Ludwig goes on to say, “It worked!” In what ways does it work and why is it worth the risk? Consider the following points:

By friending teens where they live online, it’s possible to connect them to library programs and services without ever seeing them face to face. (Of course that’s something else that seems risky—creating services that teens can use without every entering the library. More on that below.) Teens who would never come into the library can learn about materials, events, and even use resources straight from their virtual Web 2.0 spaces. No longer do libraries just meet the needs of teens who are traditional library users; they meet the needs of teens who are nonusers. As Sarah goes on to say in her YALSA Blog post,

... the great thing about FB fan pages is that they really can be portals for a ton of information and content about your library. You can post photos and videos, list upcoming events (which you can blast out to all of your friends, and get them to RSVP to), post news items, and list basic information, including a link to your library’s website and your email address and IM username. You can send messages to all of your fans with the click of a button, too.

Learning about privacy settings on social networks, and taking time to carefully determine what settings to use, are key aspects of their successful use. All users should spend time figuring out who sees what information within a socially networked environment. When librarians use Facebook and other networks of this sort with teens, they can model the best way to establish privacy settings. A librarian might set up an account so that only personal adult friends get to see photos and wall postings. She can specifically block teens from seeing information that could cross into personal space. The librarian can also suggest that teens spend time looking into their own privacy settings to help guarantee that they understand what their librarian friends do and do not have access to.

The methods that librarians use to connect with teens in social network environments differ. Sarah sent messages to teens in her community asking them to friend her. But Frances Jacobson Harris says, “I never initiate a friend request, but I will accept friend requests from students.”

What's key is not to shy away from the risk because it exists, but figure out the best way to embrace the risk in a particular setting.

It's important to decide the best way to friend teens online; it's also important not to hide the decision. For example, if the decision is to let teens take the initiative in requesting friendship of the librarian, then don't hide the fact that friending a librarian is a possibility. Inform teens that the teen librarian is available in social networks and welcomes them to make connections. Making the decision is only the first step; it's important to let teens in the community know what that decision is and how they can take advantage. It's pretty easy to say, "I'll friend teens on Facebook if they ask me to, but they never ask me so they must not be interested." But if teens don't know about the possibility, how can they do the friending?

BEING PREPARED FOR THE SOCIAL RISKS

Part of making good decisions when it comes to teens and social networking is in making sure that there are policies in place that support risk taking. At a recent meeting of librarians talking about integrating Web 2.0 into their programs or services, there was a discussion about the value and need for all librarians in the library system to become bloggers. This made some staff members nervous because they didn't feel comfortable taking the risk of posting to a library-sponsored blog. Staff worried that the wrong thing might be said. In response to their concerns, one of the technology staff members stated, "You know, we trust you to say the right thing when working on the reference desk or on the circulation desk. The blog is no different. Use the same judgment on the blog that you would in a face-to-face library environment and you will be fine."

That seems like a very clear and easy way of looking at librarian blogging. But what about the more general kinds of conversation that might appear on something like a Facebook wall or in a Twitter post? That's where the need for a social media policy, or social media guidelines, comes into play.

Ellyssa Kroski wrote, "A social media policy can help establish clear guidelines for staff members who are posting on behalf of the organization as well as employees with personal social media accounts. There are also standards being created for users, letting them know what's

acceptable to post to an organization's blog and community pages."³

This policy, or set of guidelines, not only can outline how library staff can and should make smart decisions when it comes to using social media in the library, it also guarantees that librarians are not constantly re-creating the wheel of acceptability in the social networking setting. One of the benefits of guidelines over policy is that guidelines, since they do not have to be voted on by an official governing body, can be flexible and change fairly easily. If technology changes, the guidelines can be updated quickly to reflect that change. Don't forget that social media policy, or guidelines, can also act as a framework from which to work when talking with teens about the library's social networking presence. The document that is developed could be a very useful way to start conversation with teens about how to behave when in online environments. Maybe it would even make sense to have teens help develop the guidelines; that way, teens have the chance during the development process to learn why a policy is important and about the issues that the library needs to consider to ensure use of social networking is successfully implemented.

WHY TECH-BASED COLLABORATION IS WORTH THE RISK

High school librarian Jamison Hedin started using collaborative technologies in her first year in her job. She told the authors,

Last year I worked with a member of the English department to use Google Documents for a multi-phase literary criticism project. It was the first time Google Docs was used in our district, really the first time any Web 2.0 tool was used by the students in the course of completing a school project.

Often, being the first to try something new in a library is a risk. When it comes to technology, the risks can increase. When it comes to using technology to get work done with or for teens, the risks can increase even more. For example:

- Colleagues who are already uncomfortable using technology may not want to demonstrate their lack of skills to their peers within a collaborative environment. Although a technology-based collaborative experience

might be the perfect way to get work done, it's hard to see that when that experience can also show what someone doesn't know.

- Using Web-based technologies to collaborate makes the work—whether or not it involves teens—extremely transparent. Imagine using a wiki to plan a new program or service with teens, and imagine that the wiki is available to anyone on the library staff who is interested in the project. That means that any staff member can see the comments and questions teens ask along the way, they can see how the teen librarian interacts with the teens online, and they might see what teens have to say about the library and the library staff. That can seem very risky to some.

Of course teen services is all about collaboration. Isn't that what youth participation is: collaborating with teens in order to develop the best programs and services for them? It's only natural then that technology be integrated into a library's collaborative teen efforts, even if it is risky. Some reasons:

- For many teens, technology-based spaces are where they live and work. They are comfortable using technology to collaborate, even if a librarian is not.
- Using wikis, Google Docs, and so on makes it possible to easily collaborate from inside and outside of the library. A teen can log in to her Google Docs account, click on the link to the document she and her peers are working on in the library, and edit it. She can do that at home, at a friend's house, at school, at the library, or even while traveling with her family.
- Because collaborative technologies provide access from almost anywhere, that means librarians can collaborate this way with teens who might never come into the library or might not have any idea about what the library provides. It's a perfect way to get teens involved in library programs and services, and could lead to members of the

age group actually walking through the library's front door.

- Using collaborative technologies provides those involved in the project complete documentation of the process. With wikis and Google Docs for example, it's possible to look at a history of revisions and changes. That means that librarians and teens can return to the work done previously as a way to plan for a next version of the project or to simply remind themselves of what it took to get to the final product.

Collaborating using technology-based tools is a fairly new possibility for librarians working with teens, and while it can be risky, it is definitely something that should be fully embraced. All teen participation activities don't have to move into the technology-based environment. Start with one that seems like an easy fit. Perhaps in planning a new program with teens, it would make sense to use a wiki so teens can brainstorm ideas about how the program will work, what needs to be accomplished to get it off the ground, develop a time line, and so on. Get feedback from teens and then maybe add something new to the technology-based collaboration repertoire. Taking one collaborative risk at a time can be effective and help move things forward.

GETTING STARTED WITH TECHNOLOGY RISK TAKING

One way to think about getting started in technology risk taking is to compare the technology programs and services already provided in the library with what might be, to some, a risky technology-based service.

When promoting the new technology-based program or service, it's possible to present the idea to colleagues, administrators, and community members by comparing what's being suggested to something already provided by the library. Presenting the idea this way helps those who need to buy in to it with a way to feel comfortable with the overall concept because it's not entirely new; it's just a variation of what's already provided. Which means it's a lot less risky than it appeared at first glance.

Consider the examples below.

Booktalking

Traditional: class visits in which the librarian promotes books available for checkout at the library

New technology-based version: book trailers (similar to movie previews) that teens produce about favorite books, new books, and other materials in the library collection

Selling points: Class visits, which often focus on booktalking, usually are provided on a limited basis and in many instances the librarian doesn't get to see all teens in the community during these visits. Also, it's often difficult for the teen librarian to get out of the library in order to visit schools. Web-based book trailers are available to anyone and are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The library and the librarian therefore are able to reach more teens than with traditional class visits. Web-based book trailers also give teens the opportunity to get involved in selling materials to their peers. In many cases teens prefer the word of their friends over the word of a librarian (or another adult). With teens as the producers of the book trailers and as "booksellers," more materials might get into the hands of members of the age group.

24/7 Book Discussion

Traditional: monthly book discussion group in which teens read and then discuss the same book

New technology-based version: Web-based book discussion using Goodreads, Facebook, or another social networking site

Selling points: Teens who might never come into the library may participate in a social-network-based book club. These teens might live too far from the library to be able to get to the facility when the face-to-face book discussion is going on. Or they may be involved in other activities at the same time the book group takes place. Or they may simply feel uncomfortable in a face-to-face group talking about books. Not only are Web-based book discussion groups more available to teens than face-to-face groups, they give teens the chance to talk about the book without committing to a specific time. Teens in the online book discussion can converse with peers about the book as they are reading, posting thoughts

and questions about what's going on in a story at any time day or night. This ongoing conversation provides great opportunities for analysis and understanding of text as well as for getting to know the viewpoints of others related to a reading experience.

Learning Research Skills

Traditional: classes for teens on using library research tools

New technology-based version: screencasts on using library research tools that are produced by teens and the librarian, and are available within a library's Web presence

Selling points: As with the two examples above, screencasts provide more teens with information about using library resources that can be accessed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Screencasts also provide teens with the opportunity to learn about using a specific library resource, such as databases, exactly when they need it—for example, when working on a science project. These videos also give teens the chance to pause during the viewing and try something out for themselves, and to re-watch a section in order to better understand the concepts presented. Also, when teens create screencasts, they have the opportunity to cement their understanding of using a particular library research tool because they have to learn exactly how the tool works in order to teach others, and they have to explain how the tool works in a way that is clear to those who watch the video training.

Creative Writing Groups

Traditional: weekly meeting at the library where teens write stories, poems, and so on

New technology-based version: teens use Twitter and wikis to write and then edit stories, poems, and so on

Selling points: The Many Voices project provides a perfect example of why this type of activity is an excellent way to help teens in creative writing.⁴ Many Voices brought middle school students from around the world together to write a story via Twitter. Each classroom that participated in the project added a chapter to the story using several

140-character entries on Twitter. Once each school added their Twitter chapter, the story moved onto a wiki where students edited their writing, added images, and eventually published the complete text using the Web-based self-publishing site Lulu. Teens who participated in this project were able to collaborate worldwide and see their work develop day-by-day. They were also able to learn writing and editing skills as they revised on the wiki. The final step of self-publication helped guarantee that teens were invested in the work because they knew that the story would be available around the world for others to read and own.

Booklists

Traditional: theme-oriented booklists printed and distributed at the library and in schools

New technology-based version: website that includes book reviews and videos of teens talking about books

Selling points: Going to the Web to produce and publish theme-oriented book and materials lists for teens is cost efficient and makes for easy upkeep. With a Web-based version, print lists no longer need to be copied and physically distributed; when a book is no longer available, the Web version of the list can be updated. (No more previously photocopied lists being thrown in the trash.) Don't forget too that with a Web version of theme-oriented lists, teens can have a strong presence in the creation of the content. An example of this is the *Stuff for the Teen Age 2009* published by the New York Public Library.⁵ After eighty years, the library went from a printed booklet of best books of the year for teens to a website in which videos of teens talking about a wide array of materials are included.

BUT THEY'LL NEVER COME TO THE LIBRARY!

As the examples above demonstrate, technology enables libraries to provide services to teens who might never come into the library. This can seem risky because the traditional framework requires teens to come inside the building to participate in what's offered. But providing services only to teens that visit the physical library space is actually more risky than providing off-site services. That's because cell phones, handheld

devices, laptops, etc. are all tools teens use to communicate, participate, and collaborate. Libraries need to be part of the use of these tools or risk being ignored by teens entirely.

Why does it seem risky to serve teens virtually and to make it possible that teens who use the library's virtual services may never come into the building? Is it because librarians:

Think they won't have the statistics necessary to sell their programs and services to the administration, colleagues, and the community? If so, then it's important to realize that Web-based services bring the ability to collect usage data. For example, if Facebook is used for teens to discuss the development of library programs, the teen librarian can gather numbers related to the number of Facebook fans the library page has and also the number of teens that participate in discussions on the topic.

Are uncomfortable with the technology? If so, then it's important to gain comfort in order to serve the teen population effectively. That might mean asking a teen for help on learning how to use the technology or giving teens the chance to set up the virtual service with the teen librarian acting as mentor and coach. It's actually not necessary to understand all facets of how a technology works in order to integrate it into teen programming and services. Taking the risk of learning the technology from teens along the way can be beneficial. Teens are empowered by helping the librarian learn the technology, and the librarian as learner has the chance to ask questions of teens that help them to think about what the technology actually does, how it works, and then to articulate their understanding of the technology. It becomes a learning situation for all involved.

Believe that services can only be offered effectively in face-to-face environments? If so, know that in the social networking and Web 2.0 world there are lots of examples of positive collaborative and reading experiences available. For example, it's possible to find active book discussion groups on Goodreads in which teens and librarians talk together about books—just like in a face-to-face book discussion group.

Think that by providing virtual services teens will never, ever come to the library? It's possible that they won't. But there are teens who don't come to the library when the focus is on face-to-face services. Therefore, why not look at providing virtual services as an opportunity to serve teens who might never use the library otherwise. Think of it as adding another library branch—a virtual branch. When teens interact with the library online, they are, in fact, coming to the library. It's just a different way of thinking about it. Finally, if teens learn to enjoy what the library has to offer virtually, they may end up being more inclined to visit face-to-face than if they have no experience with the positive impact the library can have on their lives. It's also important to remember that a program or service can include both face-to-face and virtual components. For example, the library might sponsor a red carpet film festival in which the book trailers that teens created for the Web are shown. Teens who created the videos, those who are interested in film, those interested in books, and so on, may all attend the festival and some of these teens might walk through the library doors because they liked the book trailers they saw on the Web.

Libraries need to be where teens are. Where many teens are today is online, on handhelds, e-book readers, smart phones, and portable gaming systems. Risk-taking librarians will create new service points just by being in these spaces with their teens. But there won't be risk in making sure teens have what they need from the library within the environment they are most comfortable using. That's not risky because that's just good service.

DOES FILTERING MAKE TECHNOLOGY LESS RISKY?

For some institutions, filtering is a good way to limit technology risks. The concept is that if we filter teen access to content on the Web, then teens won't be exposed to the "bad" stuff out there and will therefore be safe. However, in reality, by using filtering in a library setting, the risks could be greater than if teens were given open access to Web-based resources. Why? Because in a filtered environment, teens are not given

the chance to be confronted by content that might be scary or dangerous. And they aren't given the opportunity to access the problem content within a setting with people who can help the teen understand why the content could be dangerous, scary, or inappropriate for viewing. We need librarians, teachers, and parents to be willing to discuss with teens the pitfalls and positives of using technology successfully.

Teens do need opportunities to explore Web-based content in safe environments. But sometimes it might not be possible for a library to go without any filtering. What's a librarian to do in those instances?

- Work with the administration and technology staff to gain the ability to manage the filtering process. For example, maybe the teen librarian can turn off the filtering when working with a teen who needs more complete access.
- Have conversations with teens about why access might be filtered and what they need to know when using unfiltered computers. Talk to teens about how to keep themselves safe while online and include information about privacy settings on social network sites and ways to inform adults when finding something that could be considered inappropriate.
- Create materials about Web safety that teens can access in the library. For example, produce screencasts that show teens how to access privacy settings in Facebook. In the screencasts, discuss why it's important to access these settings and how they can be used effectively.
- Inform colleagues, administrators, parents, and technology staff about the risks inherent in limiting access. Make sure they have access to the latest research on teens and technology and what that says about whether or not teens are truly in danger when provided with full, unfiltered access to the Web. (See appendix E for a list of resources on this topic.)
- Keep up on local, state, and national laws (and proposed legislation) related to access social networking and Web

2.0 resources in schools and libraries. For example, in October 2008, as a part of the Broadband Improvement Act, the U.S. Congress passed a law that included the need to teach Internet safety in schools. State legislatures have passed similar laws. Knowing about these can provide opportunities for promoting the need for unfiltered access in schools and libraries—because it’s not easy to teach Internet safety when access to the materials which may be deemed unsafe is blocked. (See appendix E for a list of resources on this topic.)

Filtering can make librarians feel like they are keeping teens safe, when in actuality it is a false sense of security. It can even be seen as a *see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil* framework, because in a heavily filtered environment the librarian doesn’t see teens using websites that might be dangerous or problematic. She doesn’t hear teens talking about these websites because they aren’t allowed to access them in the library. And she never has a chance to talk with teens about them because they aren’t a part of the everyday library experience. That’s not an effective way to support teens in learning how to be safe and smart online. Instead it’s more effective to give teens the chance to access what might be problematic resources in the library and then not shy away from talking with teens about what they are seeing and doing on the Web. Give teens the chance to ask questions about technology as they use it.

THE VALUE OF TECH-BASED RISK WHEN IT COMES TO COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS

It can’t be stated strongly enough that by taking risks with technology, librarians are serving teens in the way they need to be served. It’s also important to take technology risks in order to guarantee that librarians serving teens know what’s going on in the teen world. In an October 2009 YALSA Blog post, high school librarian mk Eagle wrote,

It’s a sobering thought to realize you might miss an important event if the bulk of the organizing and promotion takes place on a social networking site you don’t use. And for many of us working in libraries, moments like these should be a wake-up call: if your district, school or branch prohibits social networking use, you’re missing out.⁶

For example, librarians not using social media tools might have missed when Neil Gaiman worked with the BBC and Twitter users to write a story that was then turned into an audiobook.⁷ This activity was a great opportunity for librarians to connect teens with a favorite author via a social networking platform. Similarly, those librarians not using social networking tools might not realize that publishers and library-related vendors regularly give away books and tools using Twitter. For example, in late November and early December 2009, YALSA offered free tickets to the Midwinter Games, Gadgets, and Gurus event to library school students. All that library school students needed to do was tweet. Those not on Twitter missed out on a great opportunity.

It can be risky to integrate technology into library programs and services. But it's just as risky—if not more so—to not integrate. Not using technology ends up being risky both in terms of providing programs and services and in being effective in the job. Take the risk of using technology instead of the risk of inaction. The teens will respond and your services will improve.

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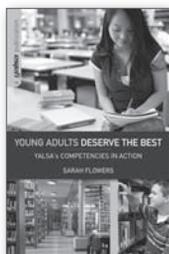
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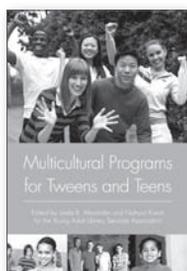
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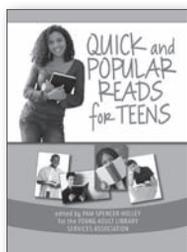
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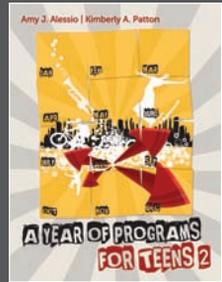
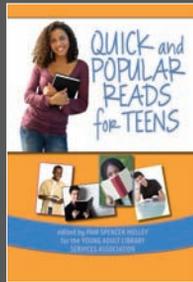
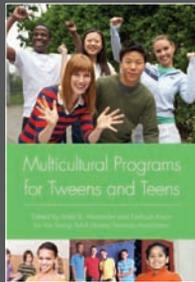
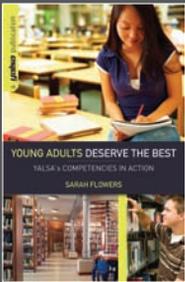
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