

Paulette Rothbauer
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
The University of Western Ontario

“People aren’t afraid anymore, but it’s hard to find books:”
Reading Practices that Inform the Personal and Social
Identities of Self-Identified Lesbian and Queer Young
Women

Abstract: I propose a presentation of my dissertation research in which I examine reading as a taken-for-granted and under-studied aspect of information seeking and information use. Specifically, I look at the role of voluntary reading in the negotiation of alternative sexual identities amongst young women (18-23 years of age) who self-identify as lesbian, queer or bisexual.

Empathetic adults concerned with the psychological, social and health issues surrounding sexual minority youth have long called for safe and anonymous access to both nonfictional and fictional materials that provide representations of non-heterosexual identities. Reading is offered as a way to escape the pressures of mainstream notions of youth sexual identity (i.e. youth-as-heterosexual) and as a non-risky way to explore alternative possibilities. However, these repeated calls for access fail to provide insights into what happens when young people actually read books that contain lesbian or gay characters and queer content. How does reading help? Have the efforts of librarians, teachers and social workers and others created access to queer reading materials for young people? If so, what are the methods of access used by young people as they seek information about what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer? What barriers exist?

This work is situated among LIS studies of everyday life that privilege taken-for-granted information practices and information behaviour of understudied populations. Qualitative principles of interpretative and reflexive methodology guided data collection and data analysis. The primary source of data was transcripts of conversational interviews with seventeen self-identified queer or lesbian young women who also liked to read. My approach was designed to explore the lived meaning of voluntary reading practices, thus directing me to begin with what readers say about reading and how they interpret its role in their own lives. Influenced by critical studies of literacy practices among young women (e.g. Christian-Smith 1990; Currie 1999; Finders 1997) and feminist reader-response theories (e.g. Hermes 1995; Pearce 1999; Radway 1991), I conceive of reading itself as an everyday life information practice that is wide-ranging but constrained by specific forms and modes of reading. Reading is undeniably central to studies of information, and yet as others have claimed (Wiegand 1997, 1999, 2003; Davis and Scott 2002), as an information practice it tends to be conceptually “black-boxed” within LIS.

My paper will report on aspects of my research that bridge two stated themes of the conference—socio-political context and skills. I will provide a brief overview of my move towards a theory of reading that ultimately rejects the powerful metaphor of reading as escape and instead posits reading as a form of engagement that generates a positive sense of personal possibilities and that provides a ground for social (and potentially political) solidarity and social connectedness. However, for my participants, access to reading materials is often constrained by what is commercially available and locally promoted by mainstream corporate bookstores, despite efforts by public libraries and feminist and gay bookstores. Other information seeking barriers and strategies will also be discussed.

References

- Christian-Smith, Linda K. 1990. *Becoming a woman through romance*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Currie, Dawn. 1999. *Girl talk: Adolescent magazines and their readers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Davis, Mari and Scott, Cristina. 2002. Where does reading fit in citation theory and information seeking? Operationalisation of reading—the “Black Box” of information use. In *Emerging frameworks and methods: Proceedings of the fourth international conference on conceptions of library and information science (CoLIS4)*, eds. Harry Bruce, Raya Fidel, Peter Ingwersen and Pertti Vakkari, 301-304. Greenwood Village, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Finders, Margaret J. 1997. *Just girls: Hidden literacies and life in junior high*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hermes, Joke. 1995. *Reading women’s magazines: An analysis of everyday media use*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Pearce, Lynne. 1997. *Feminism and the politics of reading*. London, UK: Arnold/Hodder Headline Group.
- Radway, Janice A. 1991. *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. 2d. ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Wiegand, Wayne. 1997. Out of sight, out of mind: Why don’t we have any schools of library and reading studies? *Journal of Education in Library and Information Science* 38: 314-326.
- , 1999. Tunnel visions and blind spots: What the past tells us about the present: Reflections on the twentieth-century history of American librarianship. *The Library Quarterly* 69(1): 1-32.

-----, 2003. Broadening our perspectives. *The Library Quarterly* 73(1): v-x.