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The Y-Factor: What Others Do Not Do

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The Y-Factor

What Others Do Not Do



**Jeff Gates, Information Services Librarian,
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Some readers of this column will recognize the name, Jesse Shera, who was an internationally known library educator and Dean at the School of Library Science at what became Case Western Reserve University. Shera was also a thought-provoking scholar who wrote about librarianship in the 1950s through the 1970s. Several years ago, while reading *The Foundations of Education for Librarianship* (Shera, 1972), I remember a question Shera raised, i.e. What do librarians do that no one else does? Christians who are librarians should especially be interested in this question, because of its implication about giftedness and stewardship. God has given librarians unique combinations of gifts that suit them for librarianship so they can do what no one else does. Focusing on what God has motivated and enabled us to do is wise management of our gifts. Therefore, we librarians should seek to do what others do not do because they do not have the motivation and ability to do it. Additionally, Christians who serve God and others in libraries should also be interested in Shera's answer to his own question, because it could have spiritual implications. Shera thought that the unique role of a librarian was being a mediator between people and the graphic record. Librarians fulfilling the Great Commandments surely includes helping people obtain needed information in graphic records to enable them to serve God and help others and themselves.¹

Mediating between people and the graphic record is not as simple as it may seem. For example, what is a graphic record? In Shera's day, graphic records were limited to paper books and periodicals. Today they include ebooks and digitized periodicals. In the current educational climate, librarians may be tempted to think they should try to understand the author of the graphic record or its content. Understanding the author and what he or she wrote or produced on the graphic record may help librarians and library users find the graphic record, but helping library users gain such an understanding is the unique role of teachers not librarians. Shera was correct to say that librarians are mediators between people and the graphic record, i.e. what authors write or produce, not between people and what authors think.

¹ Human limitations of space and time necessitates the recording, dissemination, storage, and retrieval of what they had learned for future generations. Librarians help people further the command in Gen. 1:28 to rule the earth by creatively providing organized access to recorded knowledge and by creatively bringing the person and the needed recorded knowledge together (Smith 2002, 16, 30-32; McDonald 1979, 13).

Reflecting further on Shera's unique role of librarians, being a mediator between people and the graphic record entails finding out what graphic records people want, where the graphic records are located, how those people can access them, and then helping them access those graphic records. Finding out what graphic records people want could involve interviewing an individual or conducting marketing research of a group. Finding where the graphic records are located probably includes the use of search tools such as an electronic catalog, databases, or guides. However, it could mean looking for a book on a particular shelf where such books are usually located. Building a collection of books² or making a guide with links to credible websites requires the skills of selecting credible resources, labeling and arranging them for access, and preserving them for future use. Knowing how people can access the graphic records they seek may entail awareness of the shelf on which the sought-out periodical is located or knowing how to find an article on a particular database. Helping people access the graphic records they want might include guiding them to find an ebook on the electronic catalog or showing them how to check out a book from the library.

If mediating between people and the graphic record is not unique to librarians, they certainly do it better than anyone else does. Even if only the latter part is true, librarians should focus on this task and let it become what guides them and what others think is their calling.

Above, I have written about Jesse Shera's question, i.e. What do librarians do that no one else does?, and answer, i.e. be a mediator between people and the graphic record. Is Shera's question the right question for librarians to ask? Would you answer Shera's question the way he did? If so, what other implications are there from this role? Please send you comments to me on the ACL email discussion list with the subject: What Others Do Not Do. †

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² Interestingly, Shera's unique role of librarian does not require or even imply a library or collection of resources.