

## **Assignment #2**

### **Case study “The Winston Public Library”**

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#### **Synopsis**

The purpose of this case study is to identify the problems presented by the Winston public library case, formulate solutions and suggest one of these solutions to resolve the situation.

The focus of our report is the Winston Public Library and the recently graduated professional librarian Joanne, who took the place of a recently retired employee of the library. In the beginning of her employment Joanne encountered a situation with a patron who challenged a book in the children’s collection of the library.

Through careful research in the matter of library case studies, communications with patrons, ethics, censorship, intellectual freedom, law and approaches to resolve a conflict with challenged books, we hope to be able to present valuable insight in this case study and suggest real-life solutions to the identified problems.

#### **Problems**

##### **Primary problem**

Taking into account our research, the primary problem that Winston Public library case presents to our attention is connected to an issue that is not new to the librarianship. Intellectual freedom and censorship are and have always been current issues in the library and that is why it is so particularly important in what way we face them and what solutions we find to defuse the problems they create. Therefore, it is crucial for the MLS professional to possess knowledge and experience in such situations and that is the main problem in this case. Joanne, the librarian at Winston Public Library has no experience being a professional librarian; therefore she has no experience with handling patron complaints and challenges.

##### **Secondary Problems**

The secondary problems that we identified in our case study are:

- Joanne has just graduated with her MLS and she is the only professional in the library, as she obviously lacks the experience needed for the job. It is of a disadvantage to her, the library and the community that she has no experienced colleague to consult and guide her until she is ready to take over.
- Joanne has no knowledge of professional ethics. We draw this conclusion from the fact about Joanne’s confusion in how to react about the patron’s complaint and that she is considering her own beliefs in the matter. Both of these facts show a crucial gap in her knowledge about librarianship and professional ethics.

- The disconnected manner of the Library Board that left an inexperienced graduate in charge of the library and to go even further- to rely on her judgment for most issues, is not only unacceptable, but dangerous, having in mind the responsibility and role of the library ( and respectively librarian) in the community.

- Joanne hasn't participated in the selection process and collection development in Winston Public library (we know this because in the case study is clearly stated she inherited the collection) and therefore, she is not entirely familiar with the collection. The four months that Joanne has been employed in the Winston Public library were clearly not enough time for her to familiarize herself with it.

- Because the Library board told Joanne repeatedly they were very happy with the previous librarian that creates an additional pressure for her to make a decision she feels the board will approve.

*\*Because in our case study we must rely on the facts provided to us, and not make assumptions, we cannot state as main/secondary problems the lack of selection policy or complaint policy in the library, the lack of proper introductory phase and training that Joanne was supposed to receive from the retired librarian in order to familiarize herself with the day-to-day operations and the collection. These can be the main problem or contributing factors to the main problem, if they were clearly stated in the case scenario.*

## Analysis

Since the first time the first library opened its doors and the first book collection was developed censorship and intellectual freedom questions have been raised. Librarians have always had to deal with complaints about their collections, either for excluding or including a particular item. The Winston Public library case is an example of situations that arise quite often in the field of librarianship.

However, these situations are not perceived as a problem, on the contrary, this is part of intellectual freedom and patrons are not discouraged to share their opinion, it is their right to do so. Having this in mind, we must also recognize the difficulty professional librarians are facing, because of the fact that professional ethics is not a part of the required courses in the curriculum for MLS professionals. This is another reason for concern, because this case study is not an exaggerated image of the reality librarians are facing and because "It is critical for LIS professionals to have the foundations from which to make reasoned decisions. Professional ethics supports such decision-making and forces us to understand our roles as members of a profession and as members of a larger society" ( Buchanan, 2008).

That is why the combination of the inexperience and lack of professional ethics as well as the overwhelming responsibility of Joanne presented in the Winston Public Library case, puts her in a position that requires a thorough research and analysis before taking action. When making a decision how to address a situation with a challenge of a book, each librarian has to count on his/her own experience and moral code to make the right decisions but collection development

policy and complaint policy are two indispensable guides in this process. Alas, not all libraries have collection development or complaint policy and this is another factor that is contributing to the problem. That is why it is every librarian's responsibility to be prepared to research and educate him/herself in the matter of censorship and intellectual freedom, how to protect the rights and liberties of the library patrons and how to avoid self-censorship as well. Creating this delicate balance in the work of the librarian takes time, practice, research and (self) education. Joanne doesn't possess at least two of the four listed.

### **Solution Scenarios**

**Solution I**

*Step 1.* To remediate the immediate conflict Joanne will talk to the patron and try to explain as best as she can the reasons behind including that particular book in the book collection of the library, what the profession of the librarian stands for and how it defends the intellectual freedom of its patrons. She will also address the ways a parent can control the literature that their children read and suggest that the parent should review the literature before presenting it to his child.

*Step 2.* If the patron continues to insist the book to be removed, Joanne will address the matter, suggesting that the patron file a formal complaint (Request for Reconsideration of Library Resources- RRLR) to challenge the book. This is his right and it is Joanne's duty to inform him about that.

*Step 3.* Joanne will contact the Library board with the complaint, presenting the case as unbiased as possible.

*Step 4.* Joanne will leave the decision in the Library board's hands.

Table 1

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Joanne will have an active role in resolving the issue, but still give the opportunity to the Library board to assist her in making the right decision;</li> <li>* The issue can be resolved on the spot if the patron accepts Joanne's explanation;</li> <li>* Joanne can help the patron understand the value and importance of intellectual freedom;</li> <li>* Joanne can help the patron improve the way he selects books appropriate for his child;</li> <li>* If the patron decides to file a formal complaint, Joanne will have enough time to do research and consult the Library board in the matter;</li> <li>* After the Library board's decision is reached, Joanne will have the opportunity to respond in a professional and competent manner;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Joanne's lack of experience, her unfamiliarity with the book collection and her personal beliefs might not allow her to present the reasons why the book was included in the collection in an unbiased way;</li> <li>* The patron might still not be satisfied and the conflict might not be resolved on the spot;</li> <li>* The patron might seek an argument;</li> </ul>

## Solution II

*Step 1.* To remediate the immediate conflict Joanne will personally address the matter, suggesting the patron to file a formal complaint ( RRLR) to challenge the book. This is his right and it is Joanne’s duty to inform him about that. She will avoid do discuss any other option with him.

*Step 2.* If the patron refuses to do that, Joanne will discuss with him the reasons behind including variety of books in the library, what the profession of librarianship stands for and how it defends the intellectual freedom of its patrons as best as she could, under these circumstances and with her limited knowledge.

Table 2

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Joanne will not have to respond on the complaint on the spot because she is not sure in her knowledge and understanding, but rather will urge the patron to file a complaint that she can address after careful research on the topic;</li><li>* This approach will give Joanne time to respond appropriately.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Most likely the patron won’t be satisfied immediately;</li><li>* Joanne will not have fulfilled her purpose as a librarian;</li><li>* Joanne will look incompetent;</li><li>* There is a possibility Joanne would give a false impression to the patron by agreeing with him ( due to inexperience in handling such a situation and due to her beliefs) that the book will be removed;</li><li>* The patron might get upset even further if Joanne can’t resolve the issue on the spot and cannot give a satisfying explanation for the selection of the book because of her inexperience in the matter;</li></ul>

## Solution III

*Step. 1.* Because Joanne is unsure how to proceed, she will explain that due to her recent employment she will need time to research the matter and to get back to the patron. She will inform the patron at the same time that he has the right to file a formal complaint (RRLR) to challenge the book if he wants to. Joanne will promise to get back to the patron as soon as possible after she does her research and consultation in the matter.

*Step 2.* Joanne will take that time to research the book, consult the complaint policy of the library (if there is one), discuss the matter with her colleagues and write a report about the situation.

*Step. 3.* Joanne will bring her report (and the patron’s complaint if he filed one) to the attention of the Library board in order to assist her in the matter of resolving the conflict.

Table 3

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* There would not be a need to resolve the situation on the spot;</li> <li>* She will have enough time to come up with a well-reasoned and well researched answer for the patron that will have a better chance to lead to a satisfying outcome for all involved;</li> <li>* She would not have to resolve the issue by herself, but rather she will be assisted by her colleagues and the Library board;</li> <li>* The patron can appreciate the approach Joanne takes and her honest intention to provide a solution in the matter;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* This approach will probably take longer than some of the other ones;</li> <li>* The patron might not be pleased considering that he will have to wait for an answer of his request;</li> </ul>

**Solution IV**

Step. 1. Joanne will agree with the patron and move forward to remove the book of the shelf. She would not discuss or inform anyone about the incident.

Table 4

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* There will be an immediate action;</li> <li>* The patron will be satisfied;</li> <li>* Joanne will be satisfied because her beliefs correspond with these of the patron;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Joanne will not have fulfilled her purpose as a librarian according to ALA standards;</li> <li>* Joanne will give the impression to the community that other cases will be resolved the same way;</li> <li>* Joanne will seriously jeopardize her position at the library, when the Library board learns about her actions;</li> <li>* There might be community protest in defense of the book that she removed;</li> <li>* Patrons might lose faith in the library as institution to preserve their right of intellectual freedom.</li> <li>* Joanne's decision might bring legal implications for the library;</li> </ul>

### **Solution V**

Step. 1 Joanne will ask her colleagues to help her resolve the issue.

Table 5

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* There will be immediate action, even if the conflict is not resolved;</li><li>* There is a chance the patron will be satisfied with an explanation from a couple of the librarians;</li><li>* Joanne will not have to face the challenge alone;</li><li>* This approach will show the patron that the library takes his request in consideration and is trying to resolve the issue;</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Joanne's colleagues also might not have better understanding or knowledge in this situation;</li><li>* Both Joanne and her colleagues might look incompetent if they can't reach an united stand in the matter;</li><li>* The patron might decide the staff is incompetent to resolve the issue and might take further action to make the matter public;</li></ul>

### **Solution VI**

Step. 1 Joanne will call the Library board chairman and ask him if she can remove the book, because of the patron's complaint and because she thinks the book is inappropriate.

Table 6

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Joanne will consult someone who probably has experience with this kind of issues;</li><li>* There will be an immediate action to resolve the issue on the spot</li><li>* With her actions Joanne will show the patron she takes his opinion seriously and is trying to resolve the issue by contacting her superiors;</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Joanne might look incompetent to resolve the issue by herself;</li><li>* The chairman might not be available or might not want to discuss the matter on the phone.</li><li>* Because Joanne might look incompetent to resolve the issue by herself, the patron might seek to contact her superiors next without giving Joanne opportunity to resolve the issue;</li></ul>

### **Selected Solution**

The solution we have selected to resolve the problem in the case study of the Winston Public Library book challenge is Solution III. The reasons behind that decision are that the consequences of this solution might have implications about Joanne's competence, but they will not damage her credibility and will not affect the library in a negative way. On the contrary, Joanne's genuine and honest approach in the situation will help in the positive resolution of the situation. By admitting she needs more time, she will on one hand affirm the seriousness of the patron's request and on the other her intention to provide the best possible solution. At the same time by stating her intention to research the matter and consult her superiors she will show the patron that she understands the importance the issue has for him. Although this solution might take longer, the probability that it will satisfy the patron the most is greater.

Solution III table

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* There would not be a need to resolve the situation on the spot;</li> <li>* She will have enough time to come up with a well-reasoned and well researched answer for the patron that will have a better chance to lead to a satisfying outcome for all involved;</li> <li>* She would not have to resolve the issue by herself, but rather she will be assisted by her colleagues and the Library board;</li> <li>* The patron can appreciate the approach Joanne takes and her honest intention to provide a solution in the matter;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* This approach will probably take longer than some of the other ones;</li> <li>* The patron might not be pleased considering that he will have to wait for an answer of his request;</li> </ul>

Considering the fact that Joanne is inexperienced and unsure in her course of action in this situation, it will be more sensible to choose a solution that does not require immediate action and opinion on her side. Solutions III and II give Joanne this opportunity, unlike Solutions I, IV, V and VI. However, in Solution II Joanne will take more impersonal approach, strictly official, which in a situation with an upset parent would not bring positive reaction. Solution III gives Joanne the opportunity to make her response personal, yet not engaging in a deep discussion in a matter she is not familiar with. Honesty, understanding and compassion are the ways to go in such a situation, even if we disagree with the patron.

Presenting a well-researched and reasoned answer can make all the difference situations like this not to escalate and that is why Solution III is our best option. Solutions I, IV, V and VI will require Joanne to improvise with an answer on the spot and hide the fact she is not familiar with the process of challenging books and the book collection itself. Solution II will give her time to answer, but as we mentioned before, the disconnected and cold strictly official approach in this case might send the wrong message to the patron, resulting in undesired complications.

Because of Joanne's lack of experience, to reach the best solution of the problem we should concentrate on using a solution that offers opportunities for her to consult other people in the matter. This opportunity is presented in Solutions I, III, V and VI. Having this in mind, in Solution I Joanne will have to be prepared to lead a discussion about the book she is not familiar with and doesn't believe should be in the collection, as well as to try to explain collection process she is not familiar with. This most likely will send the wrong message to the patron and will result in an unfavorable development in the situation. Solutions V and VI are very uncertain as an outcome too, because she will have to count on a chance to contact the chairman of the Library board at that exact moment (Solution VI) or the knowledge of her colleagues( Solution V), who are not professional librarians and it is very likely that they have not participated in the collection development as well.

Excluding Solution IV, where Joanne takes matters in her own hands and Solution III, where she is honest about her need of research on the matter, all the other solutions have a bigger chance of

upsetting the patron further. Solution IV will not upset him for obvious reasons that Joanne will agree with him and remove the book immediately, but this could result in serious complications for Joanne and the library, so this is not an advisable approach. Solution III on the other hand gives Joanne the opportunity to include personal approach while representing an institution in a professional manner, thus making the “official” position more friendly and understanding of the patron’s concern, which is what we are looking for.

The deeply personal approach of Solution III will give Joanne the edge to compensate for the time the patron has to wait, by making him understand the necessity of this period and why it is in his best interest. Although Solutions I, IV, V and VI will bring some immediate action, they are less likely to bring a satisfying for both sides outcome, as Solution III will.

## **Action Plan**

### **Short-term action plan:**

1. Joanne will explain to the patron her situation as a new employee and will ask for time to research the matter because she understands how important it is and she wants to provide the best solution for all sides. ( Immediate action)
2. Joanne will offer the patron to file RRLR if he wishes. ( Immediate action)
3. Joanne will write a report about the situation.( Timeframe 1-2 days)
4. Joanne will consult her colleagues in the matter.( Timeframe 1-2 days)
5. Joanne will contact the Library board presenting the initial report of the situation.( Timeframe 2-3 days)
6. Joanne will research the book, how it was decided to be included in the collection, what are the credentials of the recommendations for the book. ( Timeframe 2-3 days)
7. Joanne will research the matter of handling patron complaints, including through American Library Association’s (ALA) website and specifically their Intellectual freedom manual that “*is filled with good advice about preparing for challenges to library materials. It suggests actions to take before, during, and after a complaint. It is an essential tool in the area of censorship.*” (Bielefield, 1995). ( 2-3 days)
8. Joanne will write a second report to the Library Board, including all the information from her research on the background and recommendations of the book, as well as how to handle patron book challenges. ( Timeframe- 5-6 days)
9. After she hears back from the Library board with their recommendation and advice, she will contact the patron and present the official opinion of the library in the matter. ( Timeframe 7-10 days)
10. If at that time the patron is satisfied, that is the last of the short-term actions.
11. If the patron is not satisfied in how the matter is resolved, there are two ways to continue in the situation
  - a) If he hadn’t filed a formal complaint, he can do so and wait for the Library board’s decision. ( Timeframe after second contact with patron- immediate action)



- b) If he had filed a formal complaint, he can pursue other legal ways to challenge the book's inclusion in the collection. ( Timeframe indefinite)

**Long-Term action plan:**

- 12. Joanne should try to form a committee of volunteers from the community to help with book selection. ( Timeframe 1-3 months)
- 13. Joanne should organize a seminar for parents how to help their children in selecting appropriate books.( Timeframe 2-4 months)
- 14. Joanne should make sure that if there is a selection policy in the library, patrons have access to it. ( Immediate action)

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American Library Association Code of Ethics

<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics.cfm>

American Library Association Intellectual freedom manual

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/iftoolkits/ifmanual/intellectual.cfm>

American Library Association Library Bill of Rights

<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/index.cfm>