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I chose to observe a reference desk in a university setting. I chose this setting for two reasons. The first reason is that doing reference work in a university library interests me and is something I am considering as a career. The second reason that I chose to do a university reference desk is that I live in a small town and there is only one public library in town and I am not as interested in doing reference in a public library. The next two nearest public libraries are 8 and 15 miles respectively.

**About the reference desk**

The reference desk I chose to observe is located in Pullman, Washington on the campus of Washington State University (WSU). It is inside the main library branch known as Holland/Terrell library. To find the desk, there are three ways to locate it. The first is to ask at the circulation desk which sits at the front of the library. The second is to pick up the self-guided tour papers and follow the numbers to the desk (it is number four on the tour). The third and final way is that most first year students are given tours of the library as part of their core classes and the reference desk is shown to them. To get to the reference desk, walk in through the doors off of Glen Terrell Mall and go around the atrium heading directly opposite of the doors that was entered through. The reference desk will directly in front of you as you enter the doors. The reference desk in Holland/Terrell is distinguished from other service points in the library in that it sits alone in this area. There is one other service point on this area of the library but patrons are unable to see it from the doors. It also has a large cubed sign over it that says “reference”.

The reference desk at Holland/Terrell library is staffed by librarians that all cover different subject matters (List of Holland/Terrell reference libraries and the subject matters they cover:

http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/general/subjspe3.htm). According to Mary Gilles, the reference librarian I observed, it is staffed in shifts and the hours of those shifts is in accordance to how much of their job description is reference (personal communication, September 13, 2010). The reference librarians are identified to those entering into the room by a name plate stating their name. As mentioned in the previous paragraph there is a large sign over the desk saying that it is the reference desk and therefore identifying the person sitting at the desk as a reference librarian.

The materials in the reference section include such things as encyclopedias, maps, some newspapers, and electronic stations. Mary Gilles told me that the reference library does not have pathfinders but they do have library guides (personal communication, September 13, 2010). The one I saw Mary use the most, was the guide to the encyclopedias. This guide breaks down the reference books and encyclopedias by general subject. The reference books are in an area of thirteen rows, organized alphabetically. To search online, one can browse from either the library itself (accessible through the main library webpage) or from home for subject resource guides (found here: http://libguides.wsulibs.wsu.edu/). Along with these resource guides, each librarian on those pages can be contacted in a variety of ways, however at the reference desk in Holland/Terrell itself, there is no phone, email, or chat services.

**The Observation**

When I observed this reference desk on September 13, 2010, I first observed the reference librarian from a short distance from 2:15 pm till 3 pm. In that time span, 21 people came to the reference desk to ask questions. Several of the students that came up to ask a question were working on an assignment. When I observed Mary Gilles from 3 pm to 4 pm, only 14 people came up to ask questions but there were again several students who came up several times to ask questions about a library assignment that they were doing.

While observing this reference desk, there is only one librarian working at a time. A lot of this has to do with the budget of the department, the library, and the university and not so much with library policy. I am sure WSU would love to have two reference librarians (and they did at times when I was an undergrad) staff the desk but with financial problems the way they are, it is just not possible. This does cause problems however, there is only one person to answer questions and there were a couple of times where students had to stand around and wait to ask a question. There is only one other chair directly in front of the desk to sit on so the rest of the students had to stand. By having one reference librarian, it does not allow for that librarian to roam around looking to see if students/patrons need help. I did observe a girl looking at the reference books and encyclopedias looking confused and then just walking away. She finally did come back to ask but there was a good bit of time in between.

There were several good things that I noticed when a student/patron came up to ask the desk and they had a more extensive question then where something was (such as another department), the first thing the library did was turned the monitor towards the patron. This is a good idea so that the student/patron can become a participant and follow much better than if the monitor was not turned towards them. Cassell and Hiremath (2009) make a statement to this affect saying, “For this interchange to be truly affective, the librarian should include the user in the search” (20). The second thing that both the first library I observed and Mary Gilles did was ask open ended questions as stated in Cassell and Hiremath (2009) as a good idea to do (pp. 19). A third thing that I felt was a good thing in both observations is that both the first librarian and Mary Gilles were both extremely friendly, approachable, and I felt they communicated this to the patrons. This, according to Cassell and Hiremath (2009) helps make approaching a reference librarian easier (17).

There were a couple of flaws that I feel the reference desk at Holland/Terrell has. The first, as mentioned earlier, is that the librarians are not free to roam around to see if a patron in the section is confused. However, at this point in time, it really cannot be avoided due to financial reasons. The second is in relation to the first problem in that, if there is someone who comes in with an in-depth question, there can be a long wait and students/patrons may get frustrated. The third is lack of follow up. The first librarian did ask during the “interview” if the person was following but would not really end the interview with something like “Please come back if you don’t find what you are looking for” (Cassell and Hiremath, 2010, pp. 21). However, to counteract that (and I don’t think it was on purpose to do so), Mary Gilles said something along those lines whether it was “are you following?” or “come back if you have more questions” (Gilles, Mary, personal communication, September 13, 2010) and several of the students/patrons did!

Everything that I observed from both librarians seemed in line with what was written in Cassell and Hiremath. One thing I noticed and I do not know why I did not realize it sooner when I was reading is that the interview is very fluid and can take many different twists and turns. Most of the students that I observed had very direct questions because they were working on library assignments (usually the GenEd/World Civilization classes have an assignment that has to be completed using library resources where the students, usually freshman, have to put the call number, the location such as the stack, and citation for a journal). So the questions were definitely more directed but there were some more fluid ones. An example of this was that a student came to the reference desk and said “this” is my topic and I am looking for sources. The librarian asked him several open ended questions and they started a search. As they were going long, there were more opened ended questions, as well as discussion of what his topic really meant. From what I could hear and gather, the topic had gone in somewhat of a different direction and the young man had several resources to go and gather sources from.

Works Cited Page

Cassell, Kay Ann, and Uma Hiremath. (2010). *Reference and information services in the 21st*

*century*. Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.: New York.

Gilles, Mary. (2010) Personal communication on September 13, 2010.

Digital reference services are changing the way the patrons interact both with large libraries such as universities and in public libraries as well. This assignment was to compare and analyze an in person interaction and a virtual reference librarian. The second of the assignment was to look at two peer reviewed articles and discuss them and how they relate to virtual reference services.

**The Interactions**

This assignment was hard for me to do. It was that way because I have been using the library for so long. I have such a passion for reading that I know how to search the library system and where materials are located if that I wanted to learn something new. Because I wanted to get something out of this assignment as well as just doing the assignment, I decided to do a readers’ advisory question.

So I went down to the local public library (Neil Library, Pullman Washington; main library page at: http://www.neill-lib.org/Departments/Library/Default.aspx) to ask the reference librarian for some help. My question was two-fold. One, I was looking for specific authors with a similar style to James Rollins and Steven Berry, two authors that I have discovered and absolutely love. Second, I was looking for authors who write historical fiction mysteries (books that have historical under-pinning but are mysteries as well, similar to the author, Katherine Howe).

I walked into the library and since the reference desk sits right at the front of the library, I introduced myself and said I had a couple of questions. I asked both questions and she wrote them down. She asked me a couple of clarifying questions about the authors that I had suggested that I liked (basically, the questions she asked were specifics such as titles of their books). The first question she tackled was looking for historical mystery novels. Here was her solution: to put in a general keyword search for “historical mystery\*” and search. She explained why she used the asterisk. Then she printed out the results for me. This was extremely frustrating because I could have done this on my own. I did get some new authors to look at but it was rather disconcerting that this is all she did. Next she tackled my other question of finding similar authors and books to authors such as James Rollins and Steve Berry. She asked if I was familiar with the library home page and I told her I was. She then brought up the homepage, clicked on the databases that are open to the public and told me, that probably the best place to look was Novelist. While I understand readers’ advisory questions can be hard, especially if you don’t read the same sort of thing, but I felt like it was extremely rushed and that this librarian was not interested in at all finding out *why* I liked those books or what about them made them good. It seemed that she only took the basic information and did not bother to investigate further. She did end by asking if I had any more questions and if any of this helped. I told her it helped a little bit and that was the end of the “interview”.

The second part of this assignment was to ask a virtual based reference place the same question. So I posed the question to the San Jose Public library. I submitted a question via a form. I was emailed back the next day with the following answer:

“If you have a Neill Public Library card number, you can access the excellent database

named NoveList Plus to help you find books to read in your reading interests (such as

historical mysteries and specific authors). I just checked NoveList (also accessible by San

Jose Public Library patrons) for authors similar to James Rollins and received these

results: Clive Cussler, Michael Crichton, Douglas J. Preston and Lincoln Child. The only

author listed as being similar to Steve Berry was James Rollins! “(personal

communication, RCN, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, October 21, 2010).

This helped more than the reference library at Neil Public Library but it was better. There was no follow-up interaction.

**Comparisons**

When comparing these two interactions, there are several points that I considered. The first that I will discuss is how much time each interaction took. When doing the in person interaction, it took me about ten minutes to drive to the library. Since the reference area is right inside the doors of the library, it didn’t take me long to talk to the librarian. All in all, the total time for the interaction was between twenty and twenty-five minutes. In comparison, the San Jose Public Library uses a form that you have to fill out. This, of course, does not take very long but once the form is sent, it may take them time to get back to you. It took them (the reference librarians) about 10 hours to get back to me. I sent the form late Wednesday night and got a reply Thursday morning.

The second thing I will talk about is convince. This is sometimes the name of the game. Being able to email a librarian and get a response quite quickly is a very good thing for many questions. However, for my library, it’s only 10 minutes away and when I did the interaction, I was headed in that direction anyway. Had my question been more in depth (like my question 3 will be), it may have taken longer and been less convenient.

The final two items that I want to discuss are communication and sources. In the computer-based interaction, not being able to see the librarian was a little weird (it was the first time I had ever done something like that) but I do not think it was a major problem. When I did the in person interaction, the librarian did not make a lot of eye contact with me but other than that was not a lack of physical cues. In the computer-based interaction, there was no need for a back and forth interaction for two reasons, one, the librarian answered my question and, two, it was an email and not a chat. In the in person based interaction, there was a lot of back and forth because I was talking to a person.

Finally, the sources that both librarians were the same, in that I can search their OPAC catalog and I can search NoveList, which are accessible through either library.

**Analysis/Literature review**

Understanding a person is hard to do in a short amount of time and thus readers’ advisory questions are hard to answer. Asking to recommend a good book to a person really depends on the person’s definition of “good book” (Cassell and Hiremath, 2009, pp. 295). One thing that is easier to do in an in-person based interaction is that it is easier to determine appeal factors because the librarian can take physical and verbal cues from the person (Cassell and Hiremath, 2009, pp. 297). In the internet based interaction, you do not have tone of voice and other physical cues.

I still think in person references available is important because there are advantages to it that you cannot get with a virtual reference. As Cassell and Hiremath say (2009), “the problem is that virtual reference lacks the advantage of the face-to-face reference interview where the user’s tone of voice, facial expressions and body language help…” (25). There are advantages to having virtual reference as well as including it being available for those who cannot access the library (like those persons who are homebound), those that are handicapped in a way that the reference librarian cannot help such as someone who is deaf and the librarian does not know American Sign language.

It is not just email or chat programs anymore either. According to Pope et all (2010), “As of June 2008, more than 75 billion text messages are sent every month” (1) (My guess it is now even higher than that). The Pope et all article also discusses, while budgets are continuing be cut for many libraries, it is important to keep up with the ever changing technological world (2). The article discussing the Alliance Library System in Illinois which has implemented text messaging communication into their reference system and the different between email references and text ones. The problem with text messaging is that it is has a “160-character limit” (Pope, et all, 2010). This makes asking in depth questions difficult. I can see this service being used for questions like mine or questions that can be simply answered which, I think, is the point.

Another tool that the Pope et all article talks about is that many libraries and museums are putting much of their collections online (it is more so for museums and archives). This allows anybody with access to the internet can find an image or article. In my current job at the Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, Special Collections, we have around 38,000 items in our digital collection (personal communication, September 17, 2010). By allowing access to digital items it helps with further reference questions as well as being able to, if needed, come to physically look at items.

I also read two other articles on virtual reference to make some relations to what I have experienced.

The first article that I read was by Stewart Bodner in the *Journal of Library Administration* titled “Virtual Reference Reflections”. In this article, the author looks back on how reference services have changed since he was in graduate school in 1975 (Bodner, 2009, pp. 676). Bodner writes at the end of his reflection on the world wide web, in the end “the long term possibility of sending a digitized version of a book over the internet…was no longer implausible sci-fi fantasy” (Bodner, 2009, pp. 678). Having grown up with computers, I remember the days when the net was newer and it is a little hard to believe how far things have come. One of the major points that Bodner makes in his article is that, because of technology has come a long way, there is more collaboration than ever, especially in references services. He even gives an example of how reference librarians all over the world can handle questions because of the internet and openness of sources (pp. 679). Lastly, Bodner (2009) talks about questions that could possible come up and the one that intrigues me the most is “filing, tracking, and managing Web-delivered questions” (681). I think this would be a great idea especially for large libraries to have something similar to an Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and not just for basic things around the library but also for things such as most popular asked reference questions.

The second article that I looked at was written by Lynn Westbrook for the Journal of Documentation titled “Unanswerable questions at the IPL: user expectations of e-mail reference.” In this article, Westbrook (2009) addresses the fact that in “a 31-month period, 1,184 questions addressed to the Internet Public Library reference service remained unanswered” (1). This intrigued me both because I thought it was a large number and I also expected many more. Westbrook also discusses why those questions (labeled “out of scope” (374) by Internet Public Library) were not answered and the expectations that users have with virtual reference services. One of the main reasons is that many users, I feel, have this idea in their head that in a virtual reference, they, the virtual reference, is going to do the analysis of the research that is found. I feel that many people who use virtual reference services such as IPL, such as teens, lack the understanding of how to analyze a source to determine if it is usable or not. Westbrook also discussed the idea that many people do not understand the concept of the virtual reference services at someplace like the IPL and so they ask questions that are harder to answer in a library such as specific computer questions (Westbrook, 2009, pp. 376). Lastly, and I feel this is probably true with in person reference librarians as well, is that some of the questions dealt with personal nature of the user, such as sexual questions (Westbrook, 2009, pp. 376).

Looking back on my training so far, and my experiences, the aspects in the literature that really rings true for me is that reference librarians need a variety of training (such as how to handle very personal questions from patrons) and need to be update, at least somewhat, with current technology. I feel that my generation will have an easier time with adapting to the technology because we have grown up with it. From these experiences, I have gained the idea that it’s not just about what you have read but what you have experienced as well.

From my interaction with a in person reference librarian to my virtual one, I learned that readers’ advisory questions really are *that* hard. I learned that both experiences have good and bad points and finally the literature suggests that keeping up with technically is important because it is and will become a staple in reference services interactions.

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