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Interview to interaction: towards a terminology of equality in reference work

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Abstract

Reference service in librarianship has historically been tied to the reference interview as predominant teaching model. Successful reference encounters involve the mutual respect of both parties as they work towards a common goal. While there are positive traits associated with the reference interview, the term also possesses negative connotations which can influence the contact between librarians and patrons. In an effort to help develop respectful relationships, the author suggests a reclassification of the reference interview as a reference interaction.

Introduction

Reference service, now considered such a critical aspect of librarianship, has not always claimed such a high status. Today, reference work is seen as one of the core functions of the professional librarian, with the reference interview as the model by which we are taught to maintain the continuance of the field. While the social traits associated with the reference interview continue to provide a strong foundation for librarian performance, it is important to consider the attitude toward the patron that

the term "reference interview" is promoting. As future professionals, library students have the ability to change the subconscious mindset surrounding the relationship between the reference librarian and patron that places the librarian above the patron. We have the chance to re-imagine reference service as an interaction between equals. A starting point for this approach is the implementation of the term "reference interaction" in place of "reference interview."

Development of Reference Service

While it may seem contrary to our present view of librarianship, reference service did not always hold such a prominent status. In a special issue of the 1989 *Reference Librarian*, Samuel Rothstein presents a look at the changing history of reference service. In an interesting discussion on the history of both librarianship and reference, he notes how through the years there developed an increasing importance and acceptance of reference work in the library field. The role of reference has changed from readers' advisory to the present instructional capacity of reference librarians. A major incident in the development of reference work was an article by Samuel Swett Green published in the first volume of *Library Journal* entitled "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers." From Green forward a major facet of reference work has remained the personal assistance that librarians provide in order to best serve their public.

As the importance of reference in the field was increasingly recognized, it became

important to develop terminology and themes to discuss this service. It was in the 1920's when the term "reference interview" was first used to describe the interplay between librarian and patron, yet it was not until 1944 with Margaret Hutchins's *Introduction to Reference Work* that it became the standard term when thinking about reference service. A further look at the history and research into the term can be found in Bunge (1984).

Reference Interview

Since the establishment of the term, there has developed a large body of literature on what a successful reference interview should entail. In addition to the types of questions asked by the librarian, there has developed a discussion on the nonverbal cues that contribute to the reference interview. Guidelines and tips on how to conduct a successful reference interview continue to this day including discussions on how schools of library and information science should focus on teaching interpersonal skills and interviewing techniques. Lists of characteristics of a successful reference librarian interview can be found throughout the library literature. Some common characteristics include: be approachable, focus on the patron, have open nonverbal language, project a positive attitude, maintain eye contact, ask open ended questions, and avoid jargon.

Taken from a broad perspective, these traits combine to create an open relationship between librarian and patron in which the mutual give and take produces an environment of respect. Mabry (2003) discusses in detail the partnerships that develop in reference interviews by noting, "We are equals in that the librarian knows more of the research technique to uncover the appropriate sources, but the library user knows more of what his specific slant on the topic will be" (p. 41). It is important to remember the vital role the patron plays in asking the reference question. While controversy surrounds the accuracy of the so called 55 Percent Rule—that reference answers are helpful little over half the time—it is a reminder that in responding to a patron it is critical that he or she is involved in the process in order to achieve a measure

of success. The importance of cooperation between the librarian and patron is stressed by Merikangas (1982) as he notes that "a plan done in partnership will be better understood by the client, it may be superior because of the client's suggestions, and the client is more likely to carry it out if more involved in its preparation" (p. 379). As this illustrates, it is explicit respect that results in the successful reference interview.

Problems with Terminology

While respect remains critical for the success of a reference librarian, it is now time to reconsider the terminology we use. The readings, discussions, and observations of the field all show that questions are answered successfully by open, engaged librarians, yet the feeling behind the term "interview" is contrary to that ideal. Interviews, as in the case of job interviews, are often held to see if someone is worthy. This creates a clear dichotomy between the individual with power and the individual who is looking to acquire a job or in this case information. As Mabry (2003) notes, "Nothing good will ultimately come of something that is perceived in any way but equality between these two individuals" (p. 42).

Also at issue with the reference interview is the librarian's search for the perfect question. It is often lamented that patrons do not ask good questions, and for some the interview is used as a way to mold a question that is worthy of the time and knowledge of the librarian. This creates a dangerous situation in that an "aspect of interaction that we want to avoid at all costs is our own sense of judging the question, and, by extension the user who asks that question" (Mabry, 2003, p. 51). Patrons, in asking a question, are already opening themselves up by acknowledging their need for help. It is imperative that they are not treated poorly at this time which would only hurt their relationship with the librarian and, in extension, the library.

Perhaps at issue in establishing this interviewer-interviewee relationship is librarian-ship's concern with professional status. In classic professional models, such as the

case with doctors and lawyers, esoteric knowledge is sheltered. These professionals are not expected to teach their patients/clients how to serve themselves, yet this instructional aspect is considered a duty of the reference librarian. Experts, professional librarians, must be able to "rethink their relationships to nonexperts, and to work toward the sharing of knowledge rather than its opposite, the monopolization of knowledge" (Nielsen, 1982, p. 189). While we continue to have doubts about our status as professionals, we must accept the fact that in order to provide excellent patron service we must give more than our time to patrons, we must give our respect. Professionalism is to be gained through more than a superior attitude toward our patrons.

View of the Patrons

Now in discussing patrons, we must also consider the patrons' point of view in relation to the reference interview. Studies have looked at how patrons view the reference desk, why they use it (or do not use it), and various other assumptions they bring to the library. An important finding of those studies, in relation to this discussion, is the fact that patrons as a whole are unfamiliar with most aspects of the library. Hoskisson (1997) looks at seven misconceptions librarians hold toward their patrons and ways to correct them. In many cases, patrons are not even sure who the librarian is or what differentiates that individual from the other workers behind the desk. Yet, even knowing this fact, it is assumed that the patron will be able to fulfill his or her part in the reference interview. "Few reference users, even experienced ones, have ever heard of the reference interview or know that they are being interviewed" (Ross, 2003, p. 38). Patrons do not know that librarians have a formalized procedure on how the questioning session should be conducted; all they know is how they are treated by the librarian. It is hard for them to conform to the rules when they do not know that the rules exist let alone what they are. It is not surprising, then, that the patron may feel awkward in answering the questions posed by the librarian in order to find the information. The first-time library user often comes to the reference desk not knowing what will occur: "What they *should* be able

to expect is the respect due them as a client and potential colleague in learning" (Merikangas, 1982, p. 382). Here again is a statement requiring the librarian to put aside any superior feelings and approach the reference desk as a partner, eager to explore a topic of interest and share in the search for information.

Time for a Change

Knowing the negative connotations associated with the term "reference interview" and the subconscious attitude it promotes, it is time to reconsider how we discuss reference service. This is not to say that we should throw out everything associated with the reference interview. Many suggestions for a successful reference interview—openness, welcoming demeanor, interest, nonverbal cues, etc.—relate back to viewing the patron as an equal. It is only the attitude associated with the reference interview that we must change. This could be aided by changing the term we use to discuss reference work.

It is time to implement a term that clearly encompasses and demonstrates a successful reference question and answer session. While both "reference meeting" and "reference encounter" could be applied, the term "reference interaction" may best represent reference service. An *interaction* requires the active participation of each individual, and it is this dedication to give and take that occurs in the most successful reference departments. The term "interaction" would more clearly indicate to librarians what should be expected of them. It is within the field that this change in focus must take place.

Conclusion

We do not need to force ourselves to be welcoming to a peer who has our respect. A shift in our internal view of patrons will go far in how we represent ourselves during a reference interaction. As students and emerging professionals, it is our prerogative how we shape the future of librarianship. We must take the time to consciously consider how we view both reference work and the patrons that come to us for assistance.

Reference work recognizes the importance of working with the patron, but we must realize that we are not working with an inferior whom we must guide, but rather we are working with an equal whom we must respect for their contributions to the reference interaction. We should still work at reference in relation to the positive standards of welcoming, openness, etc., but we must consider why we are acting in such a way. Is it because in our superior vision of ourselves we feel the need to aid those beneath us, or are we expressing a true desire to work with our patrons to provide service in a respectful peer relationship?

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