

## Lesson 5 Discussion

For your initial post (due Saturday), please respond to any of the following questions. (Please note: We will be discussing digital reference next week, and so I don't have a question devoted to the Wikoff article in this week's discussion questions. You are welcome to respond to the Wikoff article this week, or if you prefer, you could hold onto your thoughts and discuss it next week. I wanted to split up the reading load for the digital reference lesson, so I decided to assign this article one week before the lesson itself.

1. How might Stover's conception of reference librarians as non-experts or Doherty's proposal for the reference dialogue affect your view of what it means to be a reference librarian? Do you see either of these as a valuable perspective for increasing the approachability of reference librarians? Do you think that these perspectives undermine librarians' professionalism by negating any claim on expertise and balancing the power differential?
2. Cirasella offers a more positive view of the role of Google than many previous articles have done. How do you perceive the relationship between Google (or another free search engine) and reference work? Does using Google when we are working with a patron de-professionalize our work?
3. Dervin describes a strategy for reference interviews based on neutral questioning. Do you find her perspective helpful as a way to conceptualize the process? What are the advantages or disadvantages of her strategy?
4. Respond to any other idea that struck you in the lecture notes or readings for this week.

A couple of weeks ago, I provided digital reference service for the first time in my life. It was actually my first time doing any kind of reference. I had observed a librarian answering reference questions a few weeks ago, but I didn't really get a chance to see how research questions were answered. All the questions involved specific answers or services: the address of a publisher in Spain, the type of fish in a lake, gathering a run of print journals for a professor, etc. Even the librarian felt like the questions were not typical. One of the first questions I received on my first day of providing reference was from a student at UC Davis who wanted to research the Olympics and Greeks for a history paper. The student first asked why they couldn't log in to the databases. After asking whether they were on or off campus, I realized the problem was that they needed to connect through the VPN to access the databases from off campus. The student then asked, "Assuming I log in that way, can you tell me where else I can look for information. I tried JSTOR. I simply gave advice on to the student about checking out the Classics subject guide, which includes databases that cover history. The student was at home because of an illness and just wanted a few articles. While I directed the student to databases that "might" have information for their "Olympics and Greeks" paper, I didn't really help the student find something useful for their paper because I never found out exactly what the paper was about or the requirements.

After reading Dervin and Dewdney's article, I realize that it would have been more helpful if I had used neutral questioning. How easy would it have been to ask, "What kind of information do you need?", thereby prompting the student to talk about the specific assignment. Dervin and Dewdney write,

...[I]t may help the librarian to think of the user's real query as hidden inside a room to which the user has the only key: to find the key, the librarian must use communication techniques. If the librarian uses communication techniques that are not addressed to the user's key, the resulting interview may be ineffective, i.e., unsuccessful in determining the real need, or inefficient (too lengthy). (1986, p. 510)

One problem I find with Dervin and Dewdney's idea, however, is that I think some of the neutral questioning techniques might be too "nosey." Is it an affront on privacy to ask why a library user needs to look up information on a certain topic? The user doesn't have to tell us if something is personal, but I think this might turn people off from using the library if every time they have a question, they feel like they are being "harassed." I think there is a way to use the reasoning for neutral questioning in a way that shows "I'm only asking to see if there is something better I can recommend for your particular need within the scope of this topic." Maybe something like, "If you can tell me more about why you need this book [or whatever], I may be able to tell you about a better book or give you some other advice related to your project or interest?" Something that doesn't sound so questioning is probably better. If I were asked why I needed something, I would think the person might be judging me, the topic, or the particular resource in question.

Dervin, B., & Dewdney, P. (1986). Neutral questioning: A new approach to the reference interview. *RQ*, 25(4), 506-513.