

Academic Library Reference Service:

An Observation Analysis

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LIBR 210

21 March 2011

Introduction

Before I went to college, I thought that librarians at the reference desk were only there to find books for library users. I seemed to have focused too much on the word “reference” as well as my own experiences eliciting the help of the reference librarian at the public library for items like test materials and career books. When I started college, I began to realize that the librarian was there to help students with their research problems, not just fill “simple” requests. To paraphrase a reference and instruction librarian I observed from California State University (CSU) Stanislaus, academic reference service is not just about referring students to the resources but also involves teaching students how to approach their research papers and how to use the resources available at and through the library (T.H., personal communication, March 18, 2011). But reference service, again, isn’t just about fulfilling information needs. The introduction of the Reference and User Services Association’s *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* also stipulates that effective reference service has much to do with “[l]ibrarian courtesy, interest, and helpfulness” (RUSA, 2004). After observing several academic reference librarians, I have a greater appreciation for the work they do as they engage with resources, students, and technology. It is an art form balancing these many forces to produce quality research assistance.

Background of UC Merced and the Kolligian Library

I observed three librarians conducting reference service in two academic institutions. For face-to-face reference, I observed a male reference librarian at CSU Stanislaus in Turlock, California, which is the university I attended as an undergraduate. For digital reference, I observed one male and female librarian at the University of California (UC) Merced, located in

Merced, California. These institutions are forty minutes driving distance away from each other and are also the only two public universities between Fresno and Sacramento, California, which is a relatively large geographic area.

UC Merced, the tenth and newest UC campus, opened for classes in 2005. The university is known as “the first American research university of the 21st century” (UC Merced, 2010). It has a School of Engineering, School of Natural Sciences, and a School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts and plans to open a School of Management and School of Medicine in the future (UC Merced, 2010). According to statistics from the Fall 2010 term, the student body is comprised of 4,381 students; 4,138 are undergraduate students, and 243 are graduate students. 34.7 percent of undergraduate students are in majors under the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts field, 32.2 percent are in the School of Natural Sciences, and 17 percent are engineering students (UC Merced, 2010). At UC Merced, 35.2 percent of the undergraduate students are Hispanic, 20.8 percent are White, and 30.1 percent are Asian. “Merced is one of the few college campuses where more men are enrolled as students than women” (UC Merced, 2010). Men account for 50.1 percent of the undergraduate student body, and women comprise 49.2 percent of the undergraduate student body (UC Merced, 2010).

UC Merced’s library, the Kolligian Library, has 180,000 square feet of space on four floors (UC Merced Library, n.d.a.). According to *The Story of the Library* webpage, the first floor is a café and student lounge. The second floor looks “more like a traditional library” (UC Merced Library, n.d.b.). There is a service desk for checking out materials (not to confused with a reference desk; there is no reference desk), “bookstacks [sic], traditional library tables, clusters of soft seating, and group study rooms...[t]he third and fourth floors...are very similar to the second floor, though the floors tend to be quieter the higher up you go” (UC Merced Library,

n.d.b.). One curious element of the library is the lack of desktop computers. Students either use their own laptops or check out laptops from the library (UC Merced Library, n.d.a.; UC Merced Library, n.d.b.). The Library does, however, have eight “public workstations that visitors can use to access library information online,” and there are three self-check out stations (UC Merced Library, n.d.a.). *The Story of the Library* webpage reads, “We see the physical library of the Twenty-First Century as a space that must be flexible enough to serve a variety of emerging, somewhat unpredictable needs and believe that the Kolligian Library building is just such a space” (UC Merced Library, n.d.b.).

UC Merced’s focus is on developing access to a large collection of digital materials. “As part of the University of California, UC Merced Library shares resources with other campuses and has developed much of its electronic collection in conjunction with the California Digital Library (CDL)” (UC Merced Library, n.d.a.). The University provides access to “approximately 56 000 online journals, 300 databases, 93,000 books, 632,000 online books...[and to the] 36+ million items in the UC system” (UC Merced Library, n.d.a.).

Background of CSU Stanislaus and the Vasché Library

CSU Stanislaus, one of the 23 CSU campuses in California, was founded in 1957. It opened for classes at its current location in 1965 (CSU Stanislaus, 2011a). The University “offers over 100 majors, minors, concentrations and teaching credentials, 24 master's degree programs and six graduate certificate programs as well as an Executive MBA and a doctoral degree program in Education Leadership” (CSU Stanislaus, 2011b). According to figures from the Fall 2010 semester, the most popular Bachelor degree programs are business, liberal studies, nursing, biology, psychology, and criminal justice (CSU Stanislaus, 2011b). The student body is

composed of 8,305 students, 6,972 undergraduates and 1,333 graduate students. Many are “first generation college students and working parents” (CSU Stanislaus, 2011b). Based on the Fall 2010 data, 39.1 percent of students are White and 31.9 percent are Hispanic or Latino. 65.9 percent of the student population is female (CSU Stanislaus, 2011b).

CSU Stanislaus has a much smaller library building than UC Merced; the library is located on the second and third floors of the Vasché Library building. The first floor of this building is devoted to a computer lab, the library administration offices, various department offices, and tutoring facilities. The Library offers many quiet study areas nestled between its stacks, and group study areas are also available for use (CSU Stanislaus Library, 2009). There are many desktop computers for students to use, and there are also laptops for check-out (CSU Stanislaus Library, n.d.a.). According to the Library’s *Collections* webpage, the CSU Stanislaus Library offers two floors worth of open stacks (n.d.b.). The Library subscribes to 600 print journals and “also houses older issues of an additional 1500 titles in print and/or microfilm” (CSU Stanislaus Library, n.d.b.). The Library “provide[s] access to over 30,000 periodicals online, including 12,000 titles (mostly peer-reviewed journals) from scholarly collections, as well as an additional 20,000+ magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and other non-scholarly periodical titles” (CSU Stanislaus Library, n.d.b.). Print reference materials are also available, but many article and research indexes are online (CSU Stanislaus Library, n.d.b.).

Digital Reference Experience and Analysis (UC Merced/Kooligian Library)

I observed two different sessions of digital reference through the QuestionPoint service, one with a male librarian and the other with a female librarian at UC Merced. During my first observation session, the male librarian introduced me to the technology used when conducting

reference. The librarians at UC Merced are in a digital reference cooperative through QuestionPoint. On Tuesdays from 1 to 3 P.M., three UC Merced librarians participate in digital reference, and on Wednesday from 4 to 5 P.M., one UC Merced librarian and a colleague from UC Santa Cruz participate in digital reference service. At any time, questions can come from any of the ten UC Merced campuses: UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Los Angeles, UC Merced, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, UC San Francisco, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Santa Cruz. Most of the questions come from students and faculty members, but sometimes a member of the community who is on a UC library website can also use the service to ask questions.

From my reading of Kierstin C. Hill's article "Acquiring Subject Knowledge to Provide Quality Reference Service" (2001), I understand the merits of having a wide knowledge base, keeping up with current events, and being familiar with my future employer's library collection, but imagine the challenge of ten library collections! How can one librarian possibly know what is available at and from the other nine campuses? Every UC is different: some campuses have medical schools, and some campuses even have more than one library! While the UC system is big on digital resources, the problem is that not every UC subscribes to the same resources. A librarian can only do so much if they know of a perfect resource that the other campus just does not have. Furthermore, in exploring the resources of another campus while trying to assist a student, a librarian from UC Merced cannot log into a resource that, say, only UC Davis subscribes to in order to try out a search for the student. Rather, librarians must tell students to "try" a certain database without really being able to investigate it. When both librarian and patron have access to the same database or resource, assisting is much easier. While digital reference done cooperatively in the academic environment may save on costs and time, the cooperative nature of digital reference makes it difficult to develop a sense of the collections of the other

campuses. This is problematic for both patron and librarian alike, especially when complex questions arise.

When a librarian accepts a chat—it's a race to be the first to click on the patron's name or "library patron" descriptor to open the particular chat window—the patron's information is shown in a widget on the bottom left side of the screen. This widget shows the patron's operating system, name and email address if the patron chooses to include it, and from which campus website he or she is accessing the service. The QuestionPoint service picks up on the campus name the patron is from and allows a librarian to click on a policies button that pulls up that particular university's important library pages. However, if the patron from UC Davis needs specific information related to UC San Diego, the policies button is not quite so helpful because the librarian needs to look at UCSD information, not UC Davis information. Nonetheless, this tool is helpful to quickly look up an answer to a "frequently asked" type of question that a librarian from a different UC institution might not know right at hand. An example I observed with the female librarian that demonstrates the utility of this tool was a student from UC Berkeley who wanted to know if he could pick up the key for a group study room if he used his girlfriend's email address to reserve the room. The librarian quickly hit the policies button and found the information regarding room reservations at UC Berkeley. She gave him an answer along with the link to the website where she found the information. Unfortunately, the answer was no; only the person whose email was used to reserve the room can pick up the key and must be present in the room during the study session.

Each UC Merced librarian is equipped with Mac desktop computers with two monitors. In my second session with the female librarian, she explained that what she does in between chat

sessions is write or respond to work emails, or something that doesn't take "a lot of brain power," so she can jump right into a session when she hears the sound for a waiting student, faculty, or community member who uses the digital reference service (S.D., personal communication, March 15, 2011). In my first observation, the male librarian also either did some kind of short work-related task at his desk or would sometimes continue to investigate a patron's question that had already been filled. My thoughts were that he did this for mere curiosity or just in case something better turned up and he could email the patron back more information if the patron had entered in an email address when using the digital reference service; patrons don't have to submit an email address, but the male librarian explained that doing so is helpful in case the technology cuts out mid-way through a reference session. The librarian can then easily email the student back.

I was most anxious to see how librarians could handle complex questions that were specific to another UC campus, but most of the questions asked were straight-forward and didn't require much "research." Most also didn't require an in-depth reference interview because the patrons already had their question ready in the chat box. The two librarians I observed were friendly and offered a greeting; while there are scripted greetings available, most of the time, both librarians usually typed a short hi. The librarian's name also appeared as their screen name (for example UCM_FirstName), so none of the librarians went out of their way to include their name. Most of the questions asked also didn't require a lot of probing to figure out the patron's real information need because most of the time the patrons offered the reason why they needed something as part of their question or soon into the dialogue with the librarian. However, in some instances, there was a complete disregard for probing questions and the answer was delivered, whether or not it was actually what the patron needed.

During my first observation with the male librarian, the first question received was from a student at UC Berkeley working on his or her dissertation who needed to get a hold of a particular Spanish book. He or she included a citation. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' *Digital Reference Guidelines*, librarians should "acknowledge receipt of patron question" (IFLA, 2.1 General Guidelines, 2008). The librarian, after reading the question, said hello and that he would start looking for the book. Although he didn't ask probing questions, which is emphasized as an activity to perform in IFLA's *Digital Reference Guidelines* in 2.2 Content Guidelines and 2.4 Guidelines for Chat Sessions, the student's question and embedded explanation seemed to explain exactly what the patron was wanting.

The librarian searched through the UC union catalog and found nothing. He then checked for the title on WorldCat and discovered that the closest copy was in a library in Spain! The librarian typed in the information he found, including how he found it, and the student, disappointed, let the librarian know he or she really wanted to finish his or her dissertation by May. I felt that it was very important that the librarian told the student how he found out that the book was only in Spain by explaining what WorldCat is and how it works. IFLA's *Digital Reference Guidelines* indicate, "Digital reference service should be informative; [p]romote information literacy by providing patrons with information on how you found an answer to the question" (2.2. Content Guidelines, 2008). The 2.4 Guidelines for Chat Sessions also read, "Explain your search process to the patron and describe what you are finding whenever possible. Remember that the patron cannot see you. Let the patron know what you are looking for and where you are looking" (IFLA, 2008).

The librarian proceeded to tell the student that he or she still had several options to try.

First, the librarian suggested that the student find out if the UC Berkeley Library could purchase the book through its Recommend a Book program. If that wasn't a workable solution, the librarian suggested that the student should contact the publisher or distributor. "How do I do that?" asked the student. At this point, the librarian asked for the publisher's name (I didn't get a chance to write it down), and when he received it, he jumped onto Google! He found the publisher or distributor's contact information and said that the student might also be able to buy the book directly from the publisher.

Some librarians may feel that Google de-professionalizes the work of librarians, but, Google, I felt, was the perfect resource for the librarian to use as a tool in this transaction. Jill Cirasella (2007), a reference librarian at Brooklyn College, has argued that Google can help librarians clarify or interpret patrons' "indirect, incomplete, or misleading questions." Google can also help during those occasions a patron is stuck on wording (tip-of-the-tongue questions), allow for "rediscovery" of lost online articles, and can also be useful to find correct article citations and spelling, particularly names. Search engines like Google are sometimes the only viable tool to get some forms of information, like mailing addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers. While people still do use phone books, sometimes it is easier and faster to just type in the name of a business to get an address and other contact information.

The student was very grateful with the publisher information the librarian provided and seemed less frantic in the way he or she was typing. Throughout this session, the librarian remained lighthearted and wished the student well on his or her dissertation. He also asked if the student had any other questions. At the end of this transaction, he posted a scripted closing with instructions on how to log out of the chat. Once the student logs out, the librarian can tag the session as answered, lost (only if the patron left midway through the session and didn't leave an

email address), or as needing to be addressed by the student's "home" library. This question was marked as answered. Overall, I felt that this student's question was handled well. The user was satisfied knowing he or she had options to try.

The next transaction ended in the patron logging out. The patron, who didn't leave any personal information, asked, "What kind of fish live in Irvine Lake?" The librarian asked the student to wait while he looked up the information but didn't ask any probing questions to determine what the patron really wanted. I think the librarian got the sense that this was a fact-finding question. The librarian found a great website on Google that listed the fish varieties that reside in Irvine Lake, but during the librarian's search, the user logged out. Although the information to the patron's direct question was found in Google, it may not have been the type of information the patron really wanted, but we won't really know since the patron logged out. The librarian suspected that maybe the patron was just checking to see if real librarians are available through chat. He's actually had a few transactions in which patrons logged on out of curiosity!

There weren't many transactions during this session. The remaining questions involved helping students navigate where to look for certain functions within their institutions' library websites. One student needed direction for where to perform a search in the catalog by ISBN. The librarian went to the UC-wide catalog homepage and directed the student to the pull-down menu that shows different search options. The student was in the right place but didn't realize that the search by keyword is just the default and that the other choices were in the menu. Another student from UC Los Angeles couldn't figure out how to search for items from the Clark Library through the main library catalog. After some searching, the librarian discovered that a student can look for items in the Clark Library through the main catalog's advanced search. The advanced search button was just in a very isolated location on the screen that even

the librarian had had trouble finding it. These were simple questions, and the librarian described where to go, sometimes including links. The librarian made sure that the students understood where to go and/or if they had found where to go. He then asked if they had any other questions. To end these transactions, the librarian posted the scripted closing that instructs patrons on how to end the chat session. He also tagged these questions as answered.

One challenge, however, to answering these types of questions rests in the technology used in digital reference because patrons can't "see" where the librarian is looking or what they are clicking on. In face-to-face interactions, librarians can direct students where to go by giving verbal directions and pointing as the student uses the computer mouse to click and scroll, or the librarian, with a twin monitor, can perform the search on one computer and "see" what the librarian is doing on their own screen. Some would argue that it's the lack of non-verbal communication in digital reference that makes transactions less effective, but Marie L. Radford (2006) writes that librarians do compensate for the lack of non-verbal communication in their virtual reference transactions by using specific strategies to build connections. In complex situations, it may be too difficult to show a student what to do through written words alone, or even oral directions alone for that matter. Though establishing personal relationships in digital reference is more difficult to achieve than in face-to-face interactions, what separates digital reference from face-to-face reference is that current digital reference technology does not support the use of demonstration, which is one of the most powerful teaching tools. Demonstration creates a deeper connection between learners and the content or task that is being taught.

In my observation of the female librarian, there are two transactions that stood out for me as being unsatisfactory, although one patron seemed quite pleased with the librarian's help. In the first transaction, a student from UC Berkeley was having trouble logging in to the library's

databases to get a certain article. First, the librarian asked him if he was on or off campus. He was off campus, and rather than ask him if he had signed in through the proxy server to get remote access, she looked up all the information related to signing in remotely and pasted huge chunks of text into the chat window. IFLA's *Digital Reference Guidelines* suggest that librarians should "[b]reak up long responses into a few blocks (e.g, 30 words per block)" (2.4 Guidelines for Chat Sessions, 2008). The student had already done the steps she had pasted, so this wasn't the best use of her time either. The librarian couldn't figure out the problem and typed that she would have this conversation tagged as needing to be checked by a UC Berkeley librarian.

The student, I think, didn't really understand the limitations of a librarian from a different campus, but the UC Merced librarian also didn't go out of her way to explain this point gently. The student was desperate, and typed, "Please. I really need this article." The librarian simply entered in the scripted closing and signed out of the chat. She did tag the conversation for a UC Berkeley librarian to investigate, but I was a little taken aback that she didn't take the time to be sensitive and explain why she couldn't provide him with an answer. IFLA's *Digital Reference Guidelines* suggest that librarians should "[r]espond to 100% of questions that are assigned, even if only to say, 'I'm sorry I don't know, but you can try...'" (2.1 General Guidelines, 2008). Although the librarian mentioned to me that she felt she had "failed this person," it seemed to me that she wasn't overly concerned (S.D., personal communication, May 15, 2011). IFLA's *Digital Reference Guidelines* indicate that librarians should "[b]e committed to providing the most effective service" (2.1 General Guidelines, 2008). She had other options, such as calling Berkeley herself to have the Information Technology people check on any potential problems or suggest to the student that he call Berkeley directly, but she never offered these suggestions.

The second transaction I wasn't satisfied with was due to the librarian's lack of asking clarifying questions. The transaction started like this:

"Hi. Does UC San Diego have a Dr. Seuss collection on display for me to take my first grade class?"

The librarian knew that UC San Diego had the Geisel Library and proceeded to check the library's news and events webpage. She couldn't find specific information on exhibits, and the patron also commented that she couldn't really get definitive information. Again, a simple call would have solved the problem, but the librarian started looking for other information on Dr. Seuss freely available on Google. She didn't even ask if other information would be useful before she began looking for it. She sent the patron a link with information on Dr. Seuss, and the patron mentioned something along the lines that UC San Diego was a far distance for her to travel to anyway but that she wanted to make sure her son could do his report. I felt like I really missed something during the session because I thought she was asking about exhibits to show her students. I had to confirm with the librarian if this was the patron who wanted to take her first grade class to the library. The librarian didn't seem too concerned with my question or this change in direction.

If I had been behind the reference wheel, I would have asked some questions to clarify the patron's information need and what kind of information she was wanting. It could have been that this patron was trying to kill two birds with one stone: be able to take her son to UCSD to get information on Dr. Seuss while also being able to take her students on a field trip, but without probing questions, I still have no idea what the patron was talking about or what she really needed. When I first read Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney's 1986 article, "Neutral

Questioning: A New Approach to the Reference Interview,” I felt that the concept of asking patrons questions about why they needed “something” was rather aggressive and could ward off potential visits to the physical and virtual reference desks. However, neutral questioning allows librarians to “determin[e] what the inquirer really wants to know” (p. 506). In this transaction, neutral questioning would have helped the librarian figure out what information being sought. This disconnect was very troubling for me. Was this for a report her son was working on? How old was he? What kind of information did he need? In fact, IFLA’s *Digital Reference Guidelines* stipulate: “Use a neutral questioning interview technique to determine “the real question,” and once this is determined, provide users with accurate answers, appropriate in length, level, and completeness to the need” (2.2 Content Guidelines, 2008).

The librarian proceeded to provide the patron with links to sources on Google. A few resources really did look promising, including a link to a bibliography of Dr. Seuss resources, but this doesn’t mean that the resources listed are appropriate for all age levels. Some of the content could have been written for the college student in mind, not a grade school student. After a few links, the librarian said she was probably “overwhelming the patron” and would stop. The patron was excessively grateful, using exclamation points in her thanks, and saying she would just have to ask the librarian more random questions next time since the librarian seemed to know everything. The librarian responded with humor, saying she was sweet to say so, but it was far from the truth. All she was doing was using Google.

I was also surprised that the librarian didn’t try looking up information on Dr. Seuss available in reference resources. Even before taking this reference course I knew about the *Literature Resource Center* database. My high school library, local public library, undergraduate institution, and now graduate institution, all provided access to this resource. Although the patron

wasn't a UC San Diego student, faculty, or staff member, she more than likely has the means to access this database through her local library. As an experiment, I logged into the Literature Resource Center database and got many results when I ran a simple "Person—By or About" search with Geisel, Theodore entered as my search terms (I already knew Dr. Seuss's real name). I also discovered that one the results was a short document listing two useful Dr. Seuss websites. I was able to find these websites in a Google search of "Dr. Seuss" also. Ultimately, my concern was that the librarian never really asked the patron what kind of information was needed or for whom the information was intended.

Face-to-face Reference Experience and Analysis (CSU Stanislaus/Vasché Library)

My experience observing face-to-face observations at CSU Stanislaus was much richer than my experience in observing digital reference at UC Merced. I spent a total of four hours observing interactions over a two-day period, from 1 to 3 P.M. on a Thursday and Friday. The library was very busy on Thursday and had lesser activity on Friday. The librarian explained that the business was due to the upcoming spring break. Many students were working on papers and assignments due that Friday. Friday was less busy because most of the students had already turned in their assignments and were ready for the break.

I attended CSU Stanislaus between 2003 and 2008, and, even in that short time, the library layout had changed! Previously, the layout of the reference area, though not unwelcoming, was cramped by the book stacks around it. There are now significantly more computer workstations in this part of the library, arranged in long tables. When first walking into the double-doors of the reference area, it seems quite spacious with large tables spread out with desktop computers. The reference desk is at the same height as these computer tables, with a

professional sign hanging from the ceiling that reads “Research Help.” The desk is actually two desks to create more workspace. There are two computers, one printer, and citation style manuals on the desk and three chairs. I’m not sure what the second computer is used for, but for this observation I sat in the chair in front of this computer. The librarian sat at the other computer with an empty chair to his left for patrons. Behind the desk, the librarian has a full view of the computers and anyone who walks into the reference area. Directly across from the reference desk and desktop computers for student use is a desk with another professional sign hanging from the ceiling that reads “Computer Help.” The signs are eye catching and describe the roles of the person who happens to sit behind the desk very well. The reference stacks are located behind the reference desk, but the desk in no way serves as an inhibitor to the collection.

Although I observed several reference interactions during my time at the Vasché Library at CSU Stanislaus, there was one experience that stood out to me as being particularly noteworthy. The experience involved teaching a middle-aged student how to search for articles in a database. Knowing how to access databases and search for articles is skill that is very important for college students to possess because it serves as the basis for the work they do. When students are asked to write papers for a history, political science, or composition course, they are challenged to critically evaluate ideas and information and form arguments. To accomplish this task, students must first be able to find and gather information in order to engage with the ideas presented therein. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, Standard Two indicates that the information literate student “accesses needed information effectively and efficiently” (ACRL, 2000). Students accomplish this by selecting “the most appropriate investigative or information retrieval systems for accessing the needed information;

construct[ing] and implement[ing] effectively designed search strategies; retriev[ing] information online or in person using a variety of methods; refin[ing] the search strategies if necessary; and by extract[ing], record[ing], and manag[ing] the information and its sources” (ACRL, 2000).

During this experience, the librarian taught the student how to do these tasks while also meeting most of RUSA’s *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (2004). These guidelines serve as principles librarians should guide themselves by when working with patrons. The guidelines have general principles for all kinds of reference services (digital and face-to-face), as well as specific guidelines for in-person and remote reference. It demonstrates the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that should be present for successful reference service. For library school students, the guidelines serve as a useful list of things to look for when observing and evaluating reference sessions.

The session began when the student approached the reference desk. She approached the desk hesitantly at first since the librarian and I were talking, and he motioned to her that she was not bothering him at all and asked what he could do to help her. RUSA Guideline 1.2 reads, the librarian “[i]s poised and ready to engage approaching patrons. The librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities when patrons approach and focus attention on the patrons’ needs” (2004). The patron seemed less shy at this point and said, “I need to find ten research articles.” The student then mentioned her topic was about English language learners and “equitable” testing. The librarian responded warmly, “Oh my God, ten?! Well, you better take a seat” (T.H., personal communication, March 18, 2011). He pointed at the chair next to him, and he positioned the computer screen in her direction and moved the keyboard and mouse toward her. RUSA Guideline 1.5 indicates that the librarian should “[acknowledge] patrons through the use

of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation, and by standing up, moving forward, or moving closer to them” (2004).

At this point, the librarian needed to clarify her information need. I feel that he executed RUSA Guideline 3.0 Listening/Inquiring extremely well. After listening to her question fully without interruptions (RUSA Guideline 3.3), he then asked what kind of information her professor indicated she needed. “Does it have to be peer-reviewed?” he asked. This is an example of adherence to RUSA Guideline 3.7, which indicates that the librarian “[u]ses open-ended [in this case, the question was closed but accomplished the same purpose] questioning techniques to encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information” (2004). The patron responded that she didn’t know what peer-reviewed meant, and she said it meant that the work is scholarly. “Yes, it has to be scholarly,” she answered. He then asked her if the English language learners had to be from a certain age or grade level. She immediately answered she was focusing on high school students and proceeded to tell the librarian that she was looking for articles that discussed equitable testing of high school students. The librarian asked what she meant by equitable, and she started describing what seemed to be standardized testing. RUSA Guideline 3.6 indicates that the librarian “seeks to clarify confusing terminology” (2004). After the patron explained what she meant by equitable, the librarian offered the phrase “standardized testing” in a question, and she perked up at the phrase to confirm this was what she meant. I could tell by her facial expressions that she felt better knowing that the librarian did understand what she was looking for. “So, you want to find ten articles on standardized testing for English language learners in high school?” he reiterated. The student confirmed this was her topic. This interaction is an example of RUSA Guideline 3.5, “Rephrases the question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood” (2004).

According to the RUSA Guideline 4.0 Searching:

The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, not only is the desired information unlikely to be found, but patrons may become discouraged as well. Yet many of the aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are still dependent on the behavior of the librarian. (2004)

The librarian I observed was patient and supportive during the entire search process as the following description demonstrates. After confirming the patron's topic, the librarian then asked the student if she knew how to get to the library homepage from the university homepage. She didn't, so he directed her how to get there by pointing and explaining. Once she found the library homepage, he explained that there were 130 databases that were discipline specific and that she most likely wanted to look at the education databases (RUSA Guideline 4.2, 2004). He then walked her through how to get to the databases focused on education. There were several databases on education, including the generic Academic Search Elite database, which he explained had "a little bit of everything." He told her that ERIC was the big education database. "Which would you like to look in?" he asked. She chose Education Full Text.

Before they began searching, the librarian took time to explain that it was very important to hit on good keywords to get the best results (RUSA Guideline 4.2, 2004). He got some scratch paper and wrote down her topic in a statement: I want to see if there's a standardized test for high school ESL students. They looked at her main concepts and brainstormed together possible words to use as she wrote them down (RUSA Guideline 4.2, 2004). The list included: English language learners, English as a second language, ESL, high school, assessment, testing,

equitable, equal, standard, and standardized. The librarian then had her choose words from the list to try.

She began typing assessment into the search box, and the librarian whispered, “Spelling” (she forgot an "s"), and she went back to correct the mistake (RUSA Guideline 4.2, 2004). He told her that sometimes he has gotten no results because of spelling also. He then showed her that by using quotation marks around the phrase English language learners that the search would bring up results that kept these words together. Without these quotation marks, the search would try looking up English and language and learners individually rather than taken together (RUSA Guideline 4.6, 2004). There weren't too many results from this search, but the librarian had her click on an article. In reading the abstract, he said that the first sentence looked perfect. It was great that he demonstrated how useful abstracts can be in determining whether or not an article might be worthwhile. He then walked her through using the how to get text function. He coached her through the entire process (RUSA Guideline 4.10), including unblocking the yellow Firewall ribbon that appeared. They finally arrived at the article and when they were searching for the PDF version, he commented, “Sometimes, you have to look around for [the PDF icon] because it's very small. It's like ‘Where's Waldo?’” (T.H., personal communication, March 18, 2011). He then showed her how to email the article to herself and how to save it on her thumb drive. He also made sure to tell her that as a matter of practice she should always check to see if whatever she is saving is actually being saved onto the thumb drive. “You don't want to go home and realize you didn't save any of the work you just did,” he said (T.H., personal communication, March 18, 2011).

At this point, the student asked about how she could do APA citations. She asked if there was a way it could be done automatically for her. The librarian said that for this particular article,

through Wiley, she could do that, but it might not be perfect. She tried the function, and the librarian pointed out that everything was fine except that all the words in the title of the article were in capital letters. In APA, only the first word of the title is capitalized, along with any proper nouns. He then stood up to go to the carousel behind him that had handouts on how to cite in APA style.

After discussing a little more about citations, the librarian then had her repeat the search and save process with the other results she found. This session was almost a half hour! RUSA Guideline 5.9 reads, “Takes care not to end the reference interview prematurely” (2004). After she had successfully found and saved a few more relevant articles, the librarian helped her transition back to the computer workspace she was using prior to getting help. She was very thankful. He mentioned that if she needed any help, she could come get him again (RUSA Guideline 5.2, 2004). He also mentioned that his shift would be ending in about a half hour, but that someone else could help her if he was gone. This is what I call service! After she was back working on her own, the librarian and I discussed how difficult it would have been to teach someone how to conduct a search through digital chat reference. There are some activities that require hands-on practice and demonstration to really be helpful for patrons.

Conclusion

Observing both digital and face-to-face interactions has illustrated how important it is for librarians to demonstrate their desire to help people. One’s willingness to help does play a large part in the success of reference services as I hope to have shown in my descriptions of both unsuccessful and successful interactions between librarians and patrons. Based on my observations I also believe that while digital reference has its merits, face-to-face sessions allow

for more in-depth research help. It is not so much that digital reference is less *personal* as far as communication is concerned but that face-to-face sessions allow librarians to be better teachers than they would when conducting digital reference. There are certain limitations in digital reference technology that minimize how much a librarian can convey. For me, it is the ability to really teach patrons something that translates as being more personal.

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