LIBR 210 - 13

Observation Analysis

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Face-to-Face Interaction: AL Public Library

I set out on my bike with trepidation and excitement at the prospect of witnessing my first face-to-face reference interaction. As a patron who tends to work independently in libraries, I have spent many years searching without the assistance of a reference librarian, due in part to what Fister (2002) describes as a “fear of reference.” Emboldened, however, by an opportunity to more thoroughly understand our course literature by means of real life praxis, I felt the anxiousness ease with each pedal pump.

Located in AL, California, the AL Library is one of ten branches of the Alameda County library system, and serves the 18,622 residents of AL as well as the neighboring communities of Berkeley, El Cerrito, Oakland, and Alameda. AL is a bustling, residential neighborhood near several local schools ranging from preschool to high school. The library’s building was built in 1994 and houses both the AL Library and the AL Community Center. (Alameda County, 2011) There are two entrances to the library building, one is street-side and the other is a parking-lot entrance. Upon entering the building, visitors are greeted by a large communal space, which also serves to discreetly define the library from the community center.

Just inside the library’s entrance and to the visitor’s left is a long circulation desk where staff processes returns and assists patrons with obtaining library cards among other library services. Continuing down the main entranceway, the reference desk is a prominent feature. It is centrally located in the middle of the day-to-day action and is adjacent to two well-used banks of computer terminals. Displayed on a wall in backlit block lettering about twenty feet behind the reference desk is a sign that reads “REFERENCE AREA.” All other areas of the library are identified in this manner of design; there is also a “TEEN AREA”, a “CHILDREN’S AREA”, and a “SENIOR AREA.” According to the first RUSA guideline (2004) under approachability, reference services should be “in a highly visible location and us[e] proper signage…” which AL Library appears to abide.

Admittedly, I still experienced some confusion about finding the reference desk despite its seemingly prominent location, which I’ve come to attribute to being distracted by the function of the circulation desk. Having witnessed a lot of patron activity at the circulation desk, I initially questioned whether it performed dual-duty as a circulation/reference desk. I would be interested to learn whether the circulation desk fields many informational questions, and whether this frees up the reference desk for “real reference questions.” I was also confused by the placement of the “REFERENCE AREA” sign, as it seemed to describe the reference area, not necessarily the desk. The lack of signage on the desk itself could possibly create barriers for those unfamiliar with the library. This could be especially problematic when reference librarians are away from the desk while assisting patrons or fulfilling other duties.

The desk meets patrons at eye-level, as do the reference librarians who sit on low swiveling office chairs. There are two stools placed in front of the reference desk for patron use, which I perceived as evidence that AL Library considers the potential awkwardness that people feel when asking for research assistance. This simple touch helps mitigate the unevenness of the reference interaction by promoting a friendly environment wherein patrons can participate in the research process and not feel rushed to spit out a question for fear of taking up too much of the librarian’s time.

I visited the reference desk at AL Library on two different occasions: a bustling Sunday afternoon between the hours of 3-5pm and a calm, steadily busy Tuesday afternoon between 2-3pm. On both days, I sat at a table adjacent to the reference desk from which I was able to see reference interactions but unfortunately, unable to hear as well as I had hoped.

During both visits, the desk appeared to be fairly slow although the library was busy. There was never a line of more than 1-2 patrons at any time. During slow desk times, reference librarians discussed select library matters like whether or not to reshelve the periodicals. Librarian I read the news and talked at length with a patron and friend about personal matters. Librarian II checked the library’s Facebook page, and shared some photographs from his blog with the library manager who was co-staffing the reference desk.

Two reference librarians on duty staffed the reference desk during both visits. However, on both occasions it seemed that one staff member was often away from the desk for extended periods of time to attend to other library responsibilities. Since none of the librarians wore identifying nametags, I was unable to determine which of the workers were reference librarians. As Durrance (1989) states, “signage helps the environment make more sense to the user.” Due to the steady flow of activity behind the reference desk with librarians coming and going, I thought nametags could have been useful to “establish [] a "reference presence" wherever patrons look for it” as well as facilitate reference librarians “remaining visible to patrons as much as possible.” (RUSA, 2004)

An older woman who appeared to be in her sixties handled the majority of reference interactions I observed during my Sunday visit (Librarian I). She appeared kind and fairly courteous, yet mostly unsmiling. She seemed like she wanted to be somewhere else. I observed ten reference scenarios conducted by Librarian I, three of which were non-reference transactions. The first of the three dealt with a lost library book, the second was a personal conversation, and the third was a patron’s attempt to return the library’s computer headphones. The first patron approached the desk rather sheepishly, took a seat on a stool, and confessed:

Patron: (cupped cheek in hand) ““I lost a book”

Librarian: “Oh dear.” (cups cheek in hand) “Well, the cheapest way to replace it is to buy a used copy from Amazon..”

Librarian I had been reading news on the Web when the patron approached and she appeared somewhat surprised by his presence. She managed to recover quickly enough to assist him but did not have time to greet him before he sat down. The RUSA guidelines (2004) state that librarians should be “…poised and ready to engage approaching patrons.” While it can be difficult to maintain focus when you’re sitting in front of a computer on a slow desk, and the call for distraction strikes, it still seems necessary to strive for a balance between awareness of one’s surroundings and the need to multitask.

Nonetheless, Librarian I appeared to be an attentive listener. She maintained eye contact with the patron and listened intently without interruption or turning to the computer. In this example, Librarian I “address[ed] the patron before addressing their computer screen.” (RUSA, 2004) She also “allowed the patrons to state fully their information need in their own words before responding.” The RUSA guidelines (2004) also state that reference librarians should “face[] the patron when speaking and listening,…focus[] attention on the patrons, maintain[] or re-establish[] eye contact with patrons throughout the transaction, and signal an understanding of patrons’ needs through verbal or non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions.” Librarian I’s attempt at mirroring the patron’s body language also communicates a collaborative effort and shared interest in resolving the matter. However, it did not seem as though the patron left with any further information than searching Amazon for a copy of the lost book. Librarian I might have also provided names and locations for local bookshops as well as online sources such as betterworldbooks.com (which supports libraries!) or abebooks.com.

A little while later, a hesitant patron approached the desk stating her need to use the “card catalog or a catalog or a computer.” Librarian I gestured widely to the many available computers. The patron, looking slightly embarrassed noticed one available for use and moved toward it. Librarian I then called out: “I can help you if you like.” So, the patron expressed her need for a specific title. Librarian I looked it up in the OPAC and told the patron the location of the item; the patron said “OK, I’ll go find it.” While this librarian did *attempt* to follow RUSA guideline 4.10 by “accompany[ing] the patron in the search”, she might have realized the patron’s unfamiliarity with the library and used this as a “teachable moment” to educate her about AL Library’s myriad valuable services. (Elmborg, 2002) Librarian I might have also made a concerted effort to help the patron feel acclimated to better serve her research needs and promote future library use. She also might have employed RUSA guideline 4.7 by “ask[ing] the patron if additional information [was] needed after an initial result [was] found. “ (RUSA, 2004)

During the two hours that I observed Librarian I, I witnessed numerous directional, informational and computer-use questions as well as one volatile situation between computer users. However, I did not observe any complete reference interviews, just a few clarifying questions. One example is when Librarian I was returning to the desk from assisting a patron in the stacks and was asked a question I was unable to hear. She inquired further with the patron: “Was there something specific?” The patron answered “Home Remodeling.” She returned to the reference desk and looked it up in the OPAC, then walked him to the stacks. Later, this patron returned while Librarian I was assisting another patron. Smiling and pleasant, she asked whether he needed more information. This example shows Librarian I employing the RUSA guideline (2004) of “us[ing] open-ended questioning techniques to encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information” and “check[ing] back on the patron’s progress after helping them start a search.” While she did open with “a closed and/or clarifying question to refine the search query”, she seemed to adequately determine this patron’s needs based on his willingness to later engage with her about shared musical interests and his appreciation for her assistance based on his “Thank you!”

The reference interaction dynamics I observed on Tuesday afternoon differed dramatically from Sunday’s visit. Again, the desk was staffed with two librarians, one male and one female. Both librarians were personable and friendly, but serious. The female librarian/library manager was often attending to other library duties. The male librarian (Librarian II) fielded most of the reference requests and appeared eager and enthusiastic in doing so. He cordially greeted all the patrons who approached the desk and always escorted them into the stacks when necessary. He also roved around the library assisting other patrons, and seemed generally pleasant to converse with.

I observed a total of nine reference interactions during my second visit, three of which were computer-signup questions, and five expressed a direct need for a specific item. Complete reference interviews were noticeably absent from all of the interactions I observed. What I witnessed were mostly fragments of aspects of the reference interview. As Dowd (1989) writes, “dialogue between reference librarians and library patrons is vitally important to the proper subsequent professional service rendered.” (p. 492) The absence of complete reference interviews at AL Library made me wonder how often a typical public library applied their use in reference transactions, as well has how much value should be placed on the idea of the “55 percent rule” (Durrance, 1989).

One specific interaction I was struck by was when a new patron approached the desk inquiring about the library checkout process. The patron had just received her AL Library card and had some general questions. Librarian II greeted her: “Hello, Hi”, maintained eye contact, was generally approachable and expressed interest in the patron’s request per the RUSA guidelines (2004). He retrieved information that answered her direct need. He also “accompanied the patron in the search.” (RUSA, 2004) He showed her the library’s website and pointed out various links she may find useful. “He explained how to use sources.” He briefly described Link+ and the way that interlibrary loan works. Then, he discussed the e-book lending process and how to download e-books to the patron’s Kindle. Librarian II “offer[ed] pointers, detailed search paths (including complete URLs), and names of resources used to find the answer, so that [this] patron c[ould] learn to answer similar questions on [her] own.” (RUSA, 2004) He continued his information literacy session for twenty minutes. The patron seemed very excited to receive this kind of quality service and expressed it: “I appreciate it! Thank you!” She then thanked Librarian II a second time and said “I’ll give it a go!”

Due to Librarian II’s willingness to use this as a “teachable moment” and engage the patron in a thorough information literacy session, the patron left the library with good feelings about her reference interaction, and good feelings about the library in general (Elmborg, 2002). Librarian II’s positive attitude and value-added service helped this new patron manage her library account autonomously, and possibly contributed to a successful lifetime relationship with libraries and learning.

Digital Reference Interaction: SJSU’s Ask A Librarian & SFPL’s Text & Chat

For my digital reference interaction, I decided to compare and contrast King Library’s Ask A Librarian service with San Francisco Public Library’s (SFPL)’s Text & Chat service. I was curious to discover how a local reference service compared with a statewide reference service. Both employ chat reference services and offer email copies of transcripts for later use. Neither requires the user to download any software. They were easily navigable and require very little in the way of user information. SFPL’s service requires a name and an optional email address to receive transcript copies. King Library’s service does not require any user information. Instead, they recommend that users provide an email address to receive emailed transcript copies.

The SFPL reference librarian responded to my reference question in two minutes. This fast response assured me that my question was being acknowledged and processed. However, I did not receive an initial greeting, just a clarifying question. The lack of a greeting made me feel unwelcome. I also thought the librarian was pressed for time, and I felt uneasy about bothering him/her. The interaction was further depersonalized due to the anonymity of the librarian; it simply read [sfpl-main@chat.refchatter.net](mailto:sfpl-main@chat.refchatter.net) . IFLA (2008) states “librarians serving chat patrons should identify themselves immediately upon initiation of conversation.”

I responded to the clarifying question and waited six minutes before inquiring whether s/he was still there. An additional six minutes elapsed before s/he responded to say they were still there and seeking an answer to my question. RUSA (2004) advocates “word contact” to keep users apprised of their actions. IFLA (2008) specifies that librarians “periodically reassure the patron that they have not been disconnected.” If I were a patron seeking information from this service in a different context, I would have likely signed off due to the inordinate wait time and seemingly unfriendly service which I perceived to be barriers to information and efficient service. Radford (2006) describes barriers as “relational aspects that have a negative impact on the librarian-client interaction and that impede communication.” Her studies analyzing “interpersonal aspects of the chat conversation” found that “relational disconnect/failure to build rapport was the most common barrier…” to digital reference services.

About seven minutes into the chat, SFPL’s reference librarian asked whether I had “done a search under “companies that store deliver individual references?" Here the librarian asked a question to help “refine the search” (IFLA, 2008). Yet, while I was able to determine meaning from her question, a less-experienced user may have been confused. Also, I wondered why it took seven minutes for a refining question to enter the conversation. Following are my three clarifying responses given out of frustration and a need to help expedite the search:

20:45 [9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net](mailto:9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net) No, I have not used that specific search term.

20:46 [9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net](mailto:9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net) I have only been able to find a service called Interfolio which I do not trust and would like to find an alternative.

20:47 [9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net](mailto:9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net) I tried Googling the search u suggested and came up empty. Any other suggestions?

Five minutes elapsed before I received an informative response suggesting I use one of SFPL’s databases: Reference USA to seek competitors of the document delivery service I wanted to leave. The librarian also listed several competitors by name. I was excited by this news and thanked the librarian for his/her help:

20:53 [9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net](mailto:9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net) Thanks! This is really helpful!

20:54 [9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net](mailto:9395383941332188825720348@refchatter.net) I will check them out.

This concluded the reference session. I did not receive a response to my final message, nor did I receive a follow-up or goodbye message, not even a script.

Unfortunately, I was unable to access SFPL’s databases remotely without a library card. One way the librarian may have mitigated this possible barrier to SFPL’s resources might have been to inform me that I would need a library card for access. If I had not already been a SFPL patron, I would have been inclined to become one. This kind of missed opportunity for new patron relationships creates barriers to lifelong learning and quality reference services.

I received a scripted response to my initial inquiry with King Library’s Ask a Librarian service after 26 seconds indicating the librarian’s name and presence in the chat. Six seconds later, “TAS” greeted me with “Hello”. While I did not find the greeting to be especially friendly, it served its purpose and felt particularly welcoming after the SFPL chat experience. “TAS” followed her greeting with the following clarifying questions:

[Librarian 14:19:46]: Do you mean phsyical or electronic delivery?

[Librarian 14:21:27]: SJust so I am clear, you want to have letters of recommendation delivered to you?

I explained my information need and received confirmation of my reply:

“[Librarian 14:23:35]: Oh I see, just a moment.” This simple message assured me that a librarian was on the case! In their “proposed set of model behaviors for chat reference, …Hirko and Ross (2004) [listed] keeping the patron informed” as one of five parts of a standard reference interview (as quoted in Luo, 2007). Two minutes later, “TAS” updated me with the information she was finding which did not suit my needs. However, she provided “jargon-free links” and “co-browsing” techniques to assist me in my search. (RUSA, 2004)

As a user, I felt that “TAS” was genuinely doing her best to help serve my information needs and like she truly cared about whether I found what I was looking for. All in all, it felt like a team effort. At certain points in the chat when “TAS” felt she did not know something, she was honest and said she was “reading about it now.” On a personal note, this interaction pleased me because it further illustrated her interest in her profession and the world of information at large. It also put a face on a “librario-bot.” (Luo, 2007) “TAS” also apologized when it seemed like she would be unable to provide me with the information I needed, and closed the session with a pleasant personal note.

My experience with King Library’s Ask a Librarian service was ultimately less fruitful based on the quality of information received. Yet, despite the lackluster results “TAS”’s search, I considered the experience to be a positive one based on “TAS”’s personality, effective communication efforts, and genuine attempts to help me find the information I needed. Saxton and Richardson (2002) “found that the best predictor of user satisfaction was the librarian’s behavior. Similarly, Dewdney and Ross (1994) proposed the willingness to return to the same librarian as a measure of reference effectiveness…” (Shachaf and Horowitz, 2008) I consider this criteria to be an accurate indication of a successful reference interaction. When seeking future chat reference services, I would opt for King Library’s assistance over SFPL’s text & chat reference.

References

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**SJSU LIBR 210 Reference and Information Services**

**Spring 2012 Holschuh Simmons**

**Observation Analysis Assignment Sheet**

**Due Monday, March 19, by midnight (Pacific Time)**

**Submit as a Word doc via D2L dropbox**

**25% of final grade**

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| **The project includes the following components:** | **Comments** |
| **Description of the context:** The author includes a description of the type and size of library, the physical arrangement of the reference desk for the face-to-face interaction and the technology used for the digital reference interaction. |  |
| **Description and analysis of the librarian’s manner:** The author offers an analysis about the librarian’s approachability, manner, and tone both for the face-to-face and for the virtual environment. |  |
| **Description and analysis of the reference interview:** The author provides a specific and thoughtful commentary about each librarian’s use of the reference interview, even if the reference interview was lacking or absent. |  |
| **Analysis of reference interaction in relation to the professional literature:** The author connects the interactions in a meaningful way to the course readings or to other library literature. The author includes a complete works cited/references list at the end of the paper. |  |
| **Analysis:** The author provides substantial and extensive analysis of observation in light of the professional literature and includes only enough description of the reference interactions to make the analysis make sense. In other words, the bulk of the paper is analysis, not description. | Because you did not include your own question in the digital section, it was a bit hard to connect all of your thoughts about the interaction because I lacked the knowledge about the question itself. If not for this oversight, this was a strong analysis. (I reread twice—I hope I am somehow not missing it. Let me know if I did overlook it.) |
| **Application of criteria:** The author has effectively applied established criteria (from the published literature or from a professional association or another credible source) in the analysis of both types of reference service. |  |
| **Written presentation:** The author demonstrates a facility with the conventions of written English. |  |
| **Total** | **34/35 (25% of final grade)** |

**Comments:**

Great job, Melissa! You analyzed your observations well, and you incorporated the literature intelligently and smoothly. I hope you hold onto this assignment to use for comp I (reference) and comp N (evaluation) of your e-Portfolio. Thanks for your good work.