

## **Philosophy Statements**

My information service philosophy is: the reference librarian should provide library patrons with access to information that is current and correct, be knowledgeable about up-to-date information tools, be willing to instruct patrons how to be independent searchers, and be able to achieve these services in a respectful, non-judgmental manner.

The Hamilton Library CIS / BHSD service philosophy<sup>1</sup> echoes many aspects of my own philosophy. Hamilton librarians provide information that is “valid and true,” are “prepared to teach the user how to search for information,” and do so with a “non-judgmental and attentive attitude.” Additionally, this service philosophy emphasizes user satisfaction: “what the user wants is what we provide.”

In their published standards, the American Library Association’s RUSA Task Force on Professional Competencies focuses “on the abilities, skills, and knowledge that make reference and user services librarians unique from other professions.”<sup>2</sup> Aspects of my reference philosophy are reflected in the competency areas of access and knowledge base. Other RUSA competency areas are: marketing/awareness/informing; collaboration; and evaluation and assessment of resources and services.

## **Fieldwork Objectives**

By observing reference interactions I hoped to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify reference interview techniques and evaluate their success.
2. Determine the kinds of services academic reference librarians provide.
3. Discover how the Hamilton reference service philosophy is achieved in librarians' daily duties.

## **Meeting My Objectives**

To meet these objectives, I spent 10 hours as an observer at the Hamilton Library BHSD Reference Desk. The 10 hours were achieved in 1-2 hour increments, over several weeks from April-May, 2005. I varied the time of day of my observations, and found that mid-morning and early afternoon were particularly busy times. For the most part, I sat quietly behind the reference librarians, watching their interactions with patrons, and taking notes. It was often difficult to hear, so I concentrated on body language and general attitude. Sometimes the librarian invited me to stand next to the workstation to watch the search process and to hear the reference interview more clearly. These occasions provided valuable information and great observation material for this paper. By coincidence, several of my observation sessions were attended by the same classmate, at a time when the same librarian was on duty, causing her to exclaim one day, "You two again?" This did not hinder the observation process, however; instead the librarian on duty became used to us and answered our questions freely and with gusto.

## The Reference Interview: An Observation in Three Acts

### Key to annotations (behavioral standards and question techniques)

W = Welcoming attitude

O = Open question

R = Restating question

F = Follow up

A = Acknowledging

C = Closed question

I = Instruction

### Act 1

Interior—Hamilton Library Main Reference Desk—early afternoon

*A female patron approaches the reference desk. She looks shy and uncertain as if this were her first time in Hamilton. She waits for the librarian to speak first.*

#### Librarian

Can I help you? [W, A]

#### Patron

Where are the peer-reviewed journals?

#### Librarian

Are you looking for a specific journal? [C]

#### Patron

No, I need to look at peer-reviewed journals for a report.

#### Librarian

What class is this for? [O]

**Patron**

A media and communications class.

**Librarian**

What is your topic? [O]

**Patron**

I haven't figured that out yet.

**Librarian**

So you need to look at peer-reviewed journals on media and communication to narrow down a topic for your paper?[R] Let me recommend *Communication Abstracts*, which is a good general source on media and communications. It might help you decide on a topic. Follow me and I'll show you where you can find it. I will also show you some general reference sources.

When the librarian returned, my fellow observer and I asked if it would have been appropriate to suggest topics. She responded that because she did not know the patron's particular interests, her suggestions might not be helpful. The librarian believed that if the patron explored general sources first, she would discover a topic that was interesting and exciting to her, and then come back to the reference desk if she needed additional help locating specific resources. This was a successful interaction because the patron, who was at the very beginning of her research process, was given the general resources needed to narrow her scope from "media and communications" to a more manageable topic.

## **Act 2**

Interior—Hamilton Library Main Reference Desk—mid-morning

*A male patron stands a few feet away from the reference desk and waits to be acknowledged. He shifts his weight and checks his watch. His baseball cap is pulled low over his forehead, making it difficult to make eye contact. He is a man of few words.*

### **Librarian**

(finishes with another patron, then smiles at waiting patron)

Do you need some help? [W, A]

### **Patron**

Yeah, do you have books on baseball?

### **Librarian**

Yes, I'm sure we do. Is there a specific title you're looking for? [C]

### **Patron**

No. Actually I need newspapers or magazine articles.

### **Librarian**

Are you interested in a particular aspect of baseball? [O]

### **Patron**

Uh, I guess steroids.

### **Librarian**

Oh, okay. Steroid use among baseball players?[C] Or laws about steroid use?[C] Or is there something else about steroids you are looking for?[O]

**Patron**

Yeah, all that.

**Librarian**

Have you used Voyager to search for journal articles before? I can show you how. [I]

The librarian proceeded to instruct the patron on how to search Voyager's electronic resources. A search for keywords "baseball" and "steroids" in *Academic Search Premier* yielded 278 articles. The librarian showed him how to search subject terms and find full text articles. The patron did not offer substantial answers to the librarian's open questions, forcing the librarian to resort to closed questions. However, she did determine a narrow enough search strategy that seemed to work for the patron's query. This reference interaction ended successfully with the patron satisfied with the results and happy that he could continue the search from home.

**Act 3**

Interior—Hamilton Library Main Reference Desk—later that day

*A female patron patiently waits her turn as the librarian deals with a telephone reference question. She eyes the student observers hopefully, then notices their neon green "Student" badges and continues to wait.*

**Librarian**

...feel free to call back if you need anything else. [F] Can I help you? [W, A]

**Patron**

How can I find information about the Kapolei Hotel?

**Librarian**

What type of information are you looking for? [O]

**Patron**

I'm looking for companies that have owned the hotel. It just got sold to Marriott, but I know it's been sold three or four times before this.

**Librarian**

Do you know the names of other companies that have bought it? [O]

**Patron**

No, but I know where the land is, and the address.

**Librarian**

It sounds like you are looking for business-related information on the Kapolei Hotel. [R] I recommend that you start with Pacific Business News Online. It has a limited amount of text but there is a search engine for their archives. Also the business section of the Star-Bulletin and the Advertiser are indexed through the Hawaii State Library System and in the Hawaii Collection here. Start

there with a search for “Kapolei Hotel.” Come back if you need more help. [F]

This interaction was successful because the patron was able to complete an initial search on her own. She accepted the librarian’s follow up offer and came back about 30 minutes later with specific call numbers of articles she wished to read. The librarian then directed her to the appropriate locations in the stacks.

## **Patterns of Information Needs**

I observed some very definite patterns of information needs. They varied from the very general, to the very specific, from in-depth reference queries, to quick non-reference questions. All these needs were met at the reference desk.

### **Pattern 1: General Topic Questions**

Some patrons had a broad idea of the topic they wished to find materials for and needed guidance on how to begin their search. Often they would begin their question with, “How do I find books on...?” Some examples of general topics that I observed include: jellyfish, Saudi Arabia, same-sex marriage, kava, and women through the decades. In these situations, the librarians acted as instructors showing the patrons how to conduct basic searches within the Voyager catalog and electronic resources.

### **Pattern 2: Specific Questions**

Some patrons knew the specific author or title of the item they wished to find. In these cases, librarians conducted basic searches in Voyager to determine the call number. These reference interactions were completed quickly and efficiently with most items located in Hamilton. For those items not in Hamilton, librarians recommended interlibrary loan and explained the process. Sometimes a patron’s request was so specific, that it actually became a difficult reference query. For example, one patron knew the exact title and volume number of the journal she needed, was able to locate the call number in Voyager, found the other volumes of this journal in the stacks, but just could not locate the specific volume she needed. After spending several minutes redoing

the patron's search within Voyager only to get the same results, the librarian asked the date of the journal. It turned out that the journal volume in question was new and so had not been bound and shelved in the stacks yet. If the patron had asked the more general question of "Where can I find current issues of journals?" the librarian could have helped her find the journal much more quickly.

### Pattern 3: Non-reference Questions

Many questions the reference librarians fielded were not reference questions at all. Patrons asked about the current arson situation in Hamilton, library hours, and other library services like circulation and interlibrary loan. Many patrons asked location questions: where do I pick up books on hold; where can I print out a document; where are the copier machines; where can I access WIFI; where can I get tax forms. But the most common question concerned call number locations. Most patrons approached the reference desk with call number in hand, with no idea how to locate it in the library. Librarians handled these requests efficiently, first by asking whether the book could be in the Asian or Hawaiian collection, then checking the circulation status in Voyager, and finally handing the patron a map and giving directions to the call number location.

## **Suggestions for Improvement**

As I mentioned earlier, some of the most common requests at the Hamilton reference desk were non-reference questions. I witnessed several occasions when patrons approached the desk, and when they saw that both librarians were occupied, and other patrons were in line, they left the reference area rather than wait for assistance. Since many of the questions that the reference librarians answer could easily be handled by other library staff without specific reference experience, it is worthwhile to consider reinstating the student-staffed information desk. Non-reference questions such as call number location could be answered here, freeing the reference librarians to work on more in-depth reference queries, and avoid situations where potential patrons never get to ask their question because they are discouraged by the wait.

That said, the overwhelming majority of interactions I witnessed, both reference and non-reference, were positive experiences for both librarian and patron. The Hamilton reference desk is staffed by excellent searchers, with friendly attitudes and great customer service skills. Even on those few occasions when a librarian was unable to find the exact material a patron wanted, patrons left satisfied because they were offered alternatives like interlibrary loan, or a call back from a more experienced librarian. After one reference interaction in which the librarian apologized for not finding the specific journal article and admitted she was not familiar enough with Geology to conduct more precise searches, the patron said, “You may not be a good geologist, but you are a great librarian!”

## **Evaluation**

I began my field observation with specific objectives in mind. Happily, I met those objectives. I identified and saw in action the successful reference interview techniques of a welcoming attitude, open questions, restatement of queries, and follow-up statements. I saw the different types of services that reference librarians provide and the necessary skills to do so including an advanced knowledge of electronic databases. Finally, I discovered that Hamilton's user-focused reference service philosophy is realized with every interaction that ends with a question successfully answered and a satisfied patron.

I highly recommend this project to other students. After all the hard work of LIS601—the paper-writing, the search exercises—it was gratifying to see everything I learned in class used in practical situations. Observations like this are mini-internships in a way, because they expose you to the work environment that you can expect to be in after graduation. It was heartening to see that students and other patrons rely on librarians' expertise and knowledge and refreshing to watch librarians who sincerely enjoy their work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Central Information Services / Business, Humanities, and Social Sciences Department, Hamilton Library, "Philosophy of Reference" [LIS601 handout] (UH Manoa, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> American Library Association, "Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians," *RUSA Reference Guidelines* [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/professional.htm>; Internet; accessed 9 May 2005.