Reference Interactions

Fieldwork Report

by

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Philosophy of Information Service

A commitment to information service depends on maintaining an appropriate interaction between the patron, the librarian, and the available information. It is not enough for the information to exist, the librarian and the patron must engage one another in an interpretative space where both are trying to understand what the other is trying to say in reference to an information space. Thus, the best forms of interaction, which are more of a practice than a service, are those recognize the limited but overlapping horizons of understanding in which people come to know the world.

Objectives

The goal of this field report is to explore the interactions between patrons and reference librarians at the main, but temporary, Central Information Services desk at Hamilton Library, hereafter referred to as the reference desk, paying specific attention to how initial reference questions are reformulated and reworked throughout the interaction. Thus, one of the topics that will be focused on will be on the more extended reference interviews rather than on quick questions that allowed for immediate responses.

The second important goal in observing these reference interviews is to determine how the reference librarians were dealing with the current changes in the library. As should be expected, the interactions at the reference desk were significantly affected by the present chaos that surrounds the library. Not only was the reference desk in a temporary location, but the library itself was undergoing constant changes as renovations and new technologies (such as new photocopy cards) were being implemented. The questions at the reference desk were thus very frequently connected to patrons trying to find where different parts of the library have moved. One of the objectives of the observations, therefore, is to consider how the reference librarians were dealing with, and helping patrons deal with, an ever-changing, sometimes poorly organized, and generally confusing situation.
Meeting Those Objectives

Observations were carried out during the Spring 2002 semester, and were obtained by direct observation of interactions. Notes were entered directly into a notebook computer, which I think was less obtrusive (and certainly less obvious) than writing notes longhand. Unless I was looking directly at the participants of the reference interview, I could be doing almost anything on the computer, and so the patrons were largely unaware of what I was typing. Another of the advantages of using a laptop computer was that it was possible to move from one area of the reference desk to another and set up to take notes very quickly and unobtrusively.

When necessary, the librarians were interviewed immediately after a reference question to help me clarify what was asked and how the librarian responded. Generally, however, these follow-up questions were not necessary because the observations were carried out in close quarters and the notes were entered directly into the computer. There were times, however, when I could not hear what was being said, or when the patron and librarian left the desk for a moment, such as when the patron needed help with the printing station.

General Observations

In the interaction between librarian and patron, one of the ongoing issues is who has primary control over the computer. There are several aspects to this issue, including who faces the computer monitor most directly and whose hand is actually controlling the mouse. Beyond quick questions, where the librarian is in control from start to finish, the interactions tended to mix control of the computer as the interaction moved back and forth. The best interaction tended to put control of the mouse in the hand of the person who was actually making the primary decisions. If the patron had to choose from a long list of subject headings or book titles, then it made sense for the patron to move the mouse. Sometimes, the patron’s control over the computer was total, to the point where the librarian even left the area to help someone else. One of the best phrases I heard in this context was when a librarian said: "You can keep looking here. Let me know when you're ready to try
something else.”

When the question was about a specific book, one of the most effective strategies that the reference librarians used was to automatically look up the book in Voyager. Having the record available not only allowed the librarian to answer the patron’s questions, it also allowed the librarian to anticipate any problems with the title (that it is located in a weird place, that it is checked out, and so on) of which the patron may oblivious.

One interesting patron behaviour that occurred at the desk was someone who apologized all the time, to the point where I could imagine it was becoming irritating. While it is possible for the librarian to continue to reassure the patron that the patron's requests were reasonable and understandable, at some point this may also become counterproductive. I found myself wanting to say "it's all right, already!" In the end, I don't know what the solution is here, and suspect that there is no option but to keep reassuring the user from time to time and accept this as part of the interaction.

Another interesting interaction occurred when one patron wanted to find the definition of a specific computer term in a scholarly source. The web yielded thousands of references, but it was not initially clear which ones should count as scholarly. Initially, the librarian did not seem to appreciate the requirement that the reference be scholarly, and of course the web does not offer a way to limit searches to scholarly sources. As has been often said, while the web offers a massive amount of information, not sorting out good from bad information requires analytic skills in both librarians and patrons. In this example, it was easy to come up with a definition, and even the correct information, but without the source having the proper academic status, finding the correct information is not enough — the proper bibliographic credentials had to be found as well.

The librarian also searched specific technical databases, such as "Computer & Information Systems Abstracts”. However, while many references were found to the term (which was a common computer concept), there was no article that would obviously have included a definition. Understandably, the patron did not want to
search through the articles.

Finally, the patron was directed towards the technology encyclopedias, but these were rejected (he specifically wanted a journal article from a scholarly publication).

Another aspect of the interaction, however, was the evident arrogance of the patron, who was calm throughout the interaction, but whose attitude and body language were clearly condescending (arms folded across his body, haughty tone of voice). This created evident tension in the interaction. After some time spent searching, the patron left without finding a reference.

In this interaction, I would have also suggested that the patron consult monographs on the topic that have significant bibliographies that may include an appropriate article. I doubt that this would have worked, but it would have offered another possible route for the patron to follow.

Reference Interview Observation #1: American Imperialism

One patron, an employee of the University of Hawaii, was trying to help her daughter with a school project. She had some documentation from the teacher, which gave some appropriate titles for the students to consult. The daughter was not present at the reference interview.

Patron: I need books for my daughter that talk about American imperialism.

Librarian: That’s a big topic. Maybe she should narrow the topic down. Is there a specific period of time or aspect of the topic?

Patron: I have a handout from the teacher that gives some titles.

[Librarian then looks up several of the titles, while talking the patron through the steps. For one title, the library does not have it. The librarian looked up an author, whose books were found in the holdings, but not the correct book.]
Librarian: We have this book. Let me write the call number down for you.
Patron: That's great. I'll go up to the shelves, and maybe I'll find more.
Librarian: Yes, but it's a big topic. Let's look up the subject heading to see if we can narrow things down a bit.

[Librarian finds an appropriate subject heading. This yields a list of books on the same subject.]

Librarian: How many books do you need?
Patron: We've found five, that's plenty.

[Once the references had been printed out, the librarian made notes about where the different books could be found in the library (old building, new building, special collections, etc.).]

Patron: When I take the books out, I check them out over there? [pointing to the circulation desk.]
Librarian: Yes.

I think that several things went very well with this interview. The patron's request was initially very vague (American imperialism), and by using the sample books and the subject headings the librarian was able to narrow the topic down to a manageable area of the library and to provide the patron with specific titles to look for. One of the things that the librarian did well was to undermine the patron's optimism in finding books by wandering the shelves in the stacks. In effect, the librarian forestalled what would likely have been an overwhelming experience once the patron actually had to search the shelves. The patron still intended to scan the shelves, but with five specific titles printed out and in hand, the search could be much more focused.
Reference Interview Observation #2: Where can I find G420.B4?

Questions from patrons seeking the location of specific books are by far the most common questions that the reference librarian faced. The library has been moving large chunks of the collection from one place to another, and over the last few years the overall coherence of the collection has dissolved.

What I found most interesting here was the almost total reliance on a single sheet of paper that listed call numbers and provided a schematic map of the buildings indicating where different call numbers could be found. The reference librarians had to constantly refer to this list, and they would hand out copies to patrons when desired. The map itself is somewhat confusing, offering very little sense of the spatial arrangements in the library, and listing call numbers in less than intelligible ways. It is only a temporary document, and one hopes that whoever is producing a final map once the renovations are done will produce a more professional, better organized account of where the different parts of the library collection can be found. If nothing else, however, the observations demonstrated how important library-specific information tools are. This single page must be used hundreds of times a day at the reference desk and thousands of times a day around the library.

Most of the time, reference interviews about where to find a book are short. A patron asks where a specific call number can be found, the librarian looks at the reference sheet, and then indicates the desired building and floor. Questions could become more complicated if there were a series of widely different call numbers (which normally led to the librarian giving the patron a copy of the map).

When a patron says "I cannot find this book", the best strategy for the reference librarian seems to be to determine whether the patron is just looking for the section in the regular library or is unclear what section to look for in the first place.

Patron: I am looking for "Voyage Round the World", call number G420.B4, and I have no idea where it is.
Librarian: Have you been up to the stacks to have a look?
Patron: No, I don't know where to even begin looking.
Librarian: We have a map of where the different call numbers can be found, but let me check Voyager to make sure the book hasn't been taken out. Oh, I see that it's not in the regular stacks — it's located up in the Hawaii-Pacific collection, which is on the fifth floor, just above us. They can help you up there.

The reference librarian resolved several potential problems by looking in the Voyager system to determine the status of the book. Given the frequency of questions about the regular stacks, it could have been automatic for the library to simply find the call number in the series and send the patron to the second floor of the original building. However, sometimes people cannot find books because the books have been taken out or are part of a special collection (as in this case). By determining the book’s status, therefore, the librarian was able to determine with much greater accuracy where, if at all, the book can be found in the library. Thus, while the question sounded like a question that would direct the interview to the location map, it ended up being a different, and more traditional, question.

Reference Interview Observation #3: The History of Feminine Hygiene Products

One interesting reference question that arose while I was observing was from a woman who wanted to do a paper on the history of tampons. As she explained her topic, she used the example of the way that tampons are referred to as "rags", and how that indicated what women used at one time. What she was looking for was a history of the different products, apparently with an emphasis on commercial products of the last century. After describing her general information needs, the interaction went roughly as follows:

Librarian: How much information are you looking for?
Patron: I don't have anything.
Librarian: We need to figure out what the subject heading is. I'm going to do a keyword search to find some book that fits your topic.

[The librarian then went to the Voyager system to find books that would give the appropriate subject headings. Here, I think, there was a bit of a confusion in the reference interview. Whereas the patron seemed to be looking for feminine hygiene products (and in particular the history of commercial products that culminated in the tampon), the librarian tended to look for books that dealt with menstruation (and in particular with cultural organizations, taboos, etc., and so generally found works written from an anthropological perspective )]

Librarian: [pointing to the screen] Does this book seem right?
Patron: Yes, that looks right.
Librarian: OK, then let's check the subject headings. No, these don't really match what you want. How about we look at a list of the call numbers to see what's near this book on the shelf.
Patron: Some of those look like they'd be good. I'll go check the shelves.

[Patron then heads up to the regular library stacks to search for books. While she is gone, librarian discusses the question with the other librarian and determines that another possible source for this topic would be one of the encyclopedias that focus on women’s issues.]

Patron: I found some books that talk about it.
Librarian: We have another idea about where to look. There may be some reference books that may at least give you references to other works. Let's go over to the reference stacks.
Patron: OK
One of the things I thought about this interaction was that the gender of the librarian may have been very important. Would the female student have been as engaging if the librarian had been a man? In some ways the question may be like a medical reference question, which isn’t so much personal as embarrassing. The fact that the literature itself is rife with euphemisms would not help either the searching or the reference interview process. In the end, however, the patron received a considerable amount of information, and went away happy.

Final Evaluations

The questions on American Imperialism and Feminine Hygiene products suggest two of the most important directions that a reference interview will have to proceed. The first moved from a very general, all but unworkable topic down to a specific range of call numbers and titles. The patron was then free to generalize the topic again. The second began with a specific topic for which no clear Subject Heading existed, and then moved first to general subject headings and then to general reference works (encyclopedias) as a way to find works dealing with the subject. The patron was then free to focus the topic again.

Having never worked in a library before, observing at the reference desk was an interesting experience. I had worked in a bookstore for many years, so some of the questions, such as where to find books on specific topics, were somewhat familiar.

The most difficult aspect of the exercise was not helping people. Whether I wanted to help them or not, I was constantly faced with the confused and imploring looks of patrons waiting in line, watching me not helping people.

I also realized how important the immediate issues facing the library (primarily concerning the renovations) take over the questions asked at the
reference desk. As a result, I felt that in the recent past and the foreseeable future, one of the most important general functions of the reference desk at Hamilton Library is public relations. No one is happy about the present condition of the library. Even if people recognize the need for updating and expanding the library, the impact of the changes for people using the library right now is almost completely negative. It is one thing to not find a specific book, it is another thing completely to be unable to find entire sections of the library’s holdings. The task of the reference librarians, whether they have been given this officially or not, is to help people cope, and with any luck to direct their hopes to the future as much as to the stacks.