Reference Services as a Teaching Function

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> Since all functions of a library or information center should be viewed,
> in ultimate terms, as facilitating the transfer of information, the distin-
> guishing feature of reference services is that it specifically ensures the
> optimum uses of information resources through substantive interac-
> tion with the users on direct and indirect levels.[1]

REFERENCE SERVICE IS normally perceived in three levels. First is the
personal assistance to users with information needs. Second is the formal
and informal library use instruction designed to provide users with
guidance and direction in the pursuit of information. Third is the
indirect reference service which provides the user with access to informa-
tion and bibliographical sources through interlibrary loan and inter-
agency cooperation.[2] These are the latest guidelines for reference ser-
vices as developed by the Standards Committee of the American Library
Association Reference and Adult Services Division. They include the
teaching function as a major part of the total reference service.

Guidelines and/or definitions for reference services have been a
topic for discussion at professional library meetings and in the library
literature since the late nineteenth century, even though a reference
theory seems to be still lacking, according to Wynar, Vavrek, Whittaker,
and Rettig.[3]

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Reference service deals with disseminating the function of libraries. It provides information seekers with direct, personal assistance which varies considerably in different types of libraries. The beginning of formalized reference service in American libraries parallels the organization of the American Library Association in 1876. It was related to the economic and social development in America at that time, which included the move from an agricultural to an urban economy, the beginning of public education and public libraries. The libraries' function was to be an educational one. In addition to collecting and storing books, libraries were to facilitate the use of books.[4]

Through the efforts of Samuel S. Green at the first ALA conference in 1876, reference service became formalized for the first time.[5] The need to instruct students, the active participation of the library in the educational process, the guidance of readers to elevate their reading tastes, and the provision of evidence to the community that the library performed a useful service were four emerging rationales for reference service, and they have remained to the present.[6]

In 1915 William W. Bishop defined reference work as: "the service rendered by a librarian *in aid* of some sort of study....[It] is in aid of research, but it is not research itself."[7]

Wyer theorized in 1930 that reference work could be either "conservative," "moderate" or "liberal."[8] Rothstein expanded Wyer's theory in 1960 by characterizing reference service as " 'minimum,' 'middling' and 'maximum.' "[9] These approaches to reference service remain as we enter the 1980s. The conservative or minimum approach emphasized the teaching function of reference work by guiding the users toward the utilization of bibliographic sources in order to make them ultimately self-sufficient. This approach predominates in academic, school and public libraries. The liberal or maximum approach emphasizes the delivery of specific, relevant information to the user by the reference librarian. This approach is predominant in special libraries.

At present, reference service in libraries most often consists of a combination of these two approaches and usually includes the following three components: (1) library use instruction; (2) assistance in the identification, selection, and locating of library materials; and (3) provision of ready-reference information (e.g., facts, names, statistics). More elaborate services—manual and computerized literature searches, interlibrary loan, preparation of bibliographic guides and special index files, abstracting, and translating—may also be part of reference services offered at a given library.[10]

It is apparent that even though the teaching function of reference

services has been a major component of library service since the develop-
ment of American public and academic libraries began in the late 1880s,
the arguments for and against this function have also been around since
then. These arguments seem to have become more intensified recently
for several reasons:

1. renewed and increased interest in library use instruction;
2. faculty status for academic and school librarians;
3. justification of library personnel budgets;
4. computerization of libraries; and
5. justification of librarianship as a profession.

The argument against the teaching function but in favor of the
liberal/maximum approach of reference service has been presented
eloquently by Rothstein. He wrote that librarians should conduct litera-
ture searches and validate information for the user because this would
compare more closely with the functions of other professionals.[11] Katz
stated that the majority of reference librarians are failures as teachers,
that reference work is too important to let users handle it themselves,
that it is impossible to teach users how to find information in a short
time, that most users are not interested in learning how to find their own
information, and that librarians are vastly different from instructional
faculty.[12] Continuing the argument, Wilson claimed that the role of
librarians as teachers is an organization fiction. Her major contention
was that librarians are not professional teachers in the sense that school-
teachers or college professors are, because they do not have the power of
the classroom teacher to motivate students through rewards. She did
state, however, that the role of the librarian is an "education role."[13]

Teaching on a One-to-One Basis at the Reference Desk

Reference librarians can assist patrons more effectively when they
consciously cultivate a teacher role as opposed to acting more pas-
sively as information source.[14]

This observation by Howell was based on a study of library patrons at
the University of Kentucky, and summarizes the thinking of many
reference librarians during the 1970s.

People come to the library because they need information; the
library offers reference service to help users in their quest for informa-
tion. The reference librarian interacts with the person who seeks infor-
mation through various communication processes to satisfy the
person's information need. The reference librarian may cull the infor-

mation from a reference source and give it to the user. He or she may give
the person one or more specific reference sources to obtain the informa-
tion personally. Or, the reference librarian may teach the user the
process of finding the needed information completely by himself or
herself.

The reference librarian's choice of one of these three methods
depends on many factors which must be assessed through a short com-
munication process with the user. These factors include time contraints,
personality, type of information needed, attitude, objectives of a partic-
ular library's services, etc. Whichever of the three methods the reference
librarian decides to use, some type of guidance for the user takes place.

The librarian must assess the user's information need. This takes
skill and guidance on the part of the reference librarian to ask the right
questions and to stimulate the user's thinking in terms of what is
wanted and how information is organized. After a user approaches the
reference librarian with an unclear, unformalized and partially
unknown request for information, the librarian's work in classifying
and organizing the information request in the inquirer's mind is a very
indvidualized and unique teaching process, and requires professional
training in counseling and interviewing techniques. After the informa-
tion request has been formulated in terms of possible available informa-
tion sources, the reference librarian has to decide which of the three
methods described earlier to follow:

1. If the librarian decides to cull the information from a particular
   source and present it to the user, he or she has become the evaluator
   and authority of the information and should at this point explain to
   the user some of the reasons why this particular information was
   chosen. Stating the rationale for the selected information to the user
   will be an instructional function of reference service.
2. Should the reference librarian decide to give the user one or more
   specific reference sources in which to find his or her own informa-
   tion, the teaching function is enlarged. The user should then be
   informed briefly about specific features of the sources, their merits,
   limitations, etc. Through such guidance by the reference librarian,
   the user will be able to select the type of information wanted.
3. The third method teaches the user how to find his or her own infor-
   mation. The reference librarian provides a brief search strategy in
   outline form to the user so that the information can be located as
   quickly and efficiently as possible. In the most advanced level, this
   instructional function may also include teaching the user to "acquire
   an appreciation of the interconnections between information struc-

ture, reference source structure and retrieval method.'"[15] This method is the most time-consuming and requires some monitoring of the user to make certain that the provided procedure is followed.

User Guides

Reference librarians further fulfill their teaching function by preparing guides for users in the form of good signage, printed guides to library services, point-of-use instruction, self-guided library tours, printed Pathfinders, or bibliographic guides to the subject literature. Since it is not always possible to interact with every library user because of staff shortages or user shyness, the user guides are a very important component of the reference service. It takes time, money, and design, writing and teaching skills on the part of the reference librarians to prepare these guides, but the effort is well worth it.

Good signage is essential for efficient library orientation with a minimum of personnel. Clear, readable and uniform signs which can be understood by any novice to the library world are a must, but are sadly lacking in most libraries. Renewed attention to this problem is evident in Pollet and Haskell's publication.[16] Most importantly, when new signage is contemplated by reference librarians, user input should be obtained. It should also be noted that reference librarians are best suited to the task of designing library signage, because their constant interaction with users makes them aware of the types of signs needed, for what and where.

Printed guides to library services such as interlibrary loan, circulation, computer searching, photocopying, media production, and specialized collections, in the format of handbooks, notebooks or other handouts, are also essential for orienting the user to the library. Again, reference librarians are uniquely qualified to plan and produce these guides because they are aware of users' questions and can easily assess what type of information is needed. This does not mean that other library units, such as the graphics and media services, should *not* be involved, but the overall planning should be carried out by the reference librarians.

Point-of-use instruction is defined as "instructional media located with or adjacent to a research tool explaining its efficient use [which] may be print or non-print format or a combination of the two."[17] These should also be prepared by reference librarians for those reference sources used most frequently, and utilizing their experience in explaining these sources to users.

Self-guided library tours in print or media format will free reference librarians from the repetitiveness of the "library tour syndrome" and leave them more time for their teaching role. In order to prepare these self-guided tours, media services, speech departments and other sources of writing experts should be utilized to cooperate with the reference librarians. Even though the production of these tours requires time, money and periodical updating, the effort is worth it.

Printed Pathfinders and bibliographic guides to the subject literature can serve as teaching tools for individual users and groups, on their own or with guidance from a reference librarian. They are time-consuming to prepare. The cooperation of subject specialists in the preparation of these guides also is most important to ensure the best product possible. If these guides are available, the reference librarian can refer users to them and does not have to cover all of the information on an individual basis. These guides can also be used as outlines for any group instructional sessions.

In summary, the preparation of user guides by reference librarians qualifies as another teaching function. Like teachers preparing instructional materials for their students, librarians preparing these user guides must assess their users' needs and educational levels, know existing resources, and be familiar with teaching methodology. If reference librarians have not had previous teaching experience or education which qualifies them for the preparation of such instructional materials, they can cooperate with other educational experts in the institution, or obtain needed expertise through continuing education offerings.

Up to this point, discussion of the teaching function of reference services has been in terms of all types of libraries—public, special, school, and academic. However, this teaching function, as mentioned earlier, is intensified in school and academic libraries because of the educational objectives inherent in these environments.

School and Academic Libraries

Bibliographic instruction seems to have become an established feature of academic reference work, both in universities and colleges, and it should no longer be necessary to prove that it is something worth doing.[18]

There has been an increased emphasis on library use instruction as part of reference services during the last ten years. Also, tremendous progress has been made to bring the concern with library use instruction

to the attention of the profession through its organizations, the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries. Guidelines for bibliographic instruction have been approved, a new Bibliographic Instruction Section and a new Library Instruction Round Table have been formed, yet the arguments for and against the value of instructing users continue.[19]

In school and academic libraries where librarians often have faculty status and are encouraged to participate in the educational process through involvement in curriculum development, committee work and team teaching, reference service fulfills its teaching function. In addition to their one-to-one teaching at the reference desk, reference librarians often teach credit/noncredit courses on library skills; team-teach research methods courses in subject areas; offer seminars and workshops for students, faculty or administrators; and provide assignment-related/course-related library instruction to many different classes.

Of course, not all reference librarians become as deeply involved in the teaching process as described here. Instead, the services provided by reference librarians vary greatly, based on their library's and their own professional objectives. Some reference librarians may emphasize the teaching function of reference work; others, the function of providing information. This is unfortunate, because such variance will ultimately confuse the users as to what to expect from reference services. This, in turn, will complicate the communication process between user and reference librarian, and may also lead to increased hesitancy on the part of the user to ask for assistance from the reference librarian. Such complications can be avoided if reference librarians exhibit consistent behavior in their dealings with users and follow clearly stated objectives for reference service.

Implications for the 1980s

There is no doubt that the arguments within the library profession as to whether or not reference work should stress the teaching function will remain strong. New developments in the library field which will confront librarians in the 1980s, such as computerized literature searching, the revised version of *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules,* and the closing of card catalogs, will make it mandatory for reference librarians to teach users how to cope with these developments in order to obtain information. With decreasing budgets for libraries and increasing rates of inflation a reality of the 1980s, librarians, especially those in reference services, will be faced with justifying their functions and will be held

increasingly accountable for the quality of their services. Perhaps a suitable response to these issues is for the library to become a "teaching library" as defined by Guskin, et al.[20] Such a library becomes directly involved in implementing the mission of educating the public through increased teaching and community outreach activities. In this type of library, the teaching function of reference service becomes the most important and most highly developed component of the library's services. Careful planning and close cooperation with all users to be served are mandatory. Only through hard work, determination and carefully planned changes can such a "teaching library" evolve. It will be interesting to watch how many libraries will accept the challenge of becoming a "teaching library" in the next decade.

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