

RUNNING HEAD: Rathmel, Reference Observation

By the Book: an Observation of the Lawrence Public Library Reference Desk

Angela Rathmel

Emporia State University, School of Library and Information Management

LI813 : Evaluation of Print and Electronic Resources and Services

Today's reference librarian is experiencing a complex and fast-paced transformation related primarily to emerging technology and communication trends. As a result, it seems necessary not only to review the literature on the topic of the reference interview – the primary communication incident among library professionals – but also observe and evaluate reference librarians in the field with new perspective. Through a project assignment for graduate course work in Library and Information Science, I had the opportunity to observe the reference desk of Lawrence Public Library in Lawrence, KS and experience some of these changes directly. The reference desk at Lawrence Public Library is staffed by a part-time scheduled rotation of library staff. The staff are a mix of librarians and library paraprofessionals. Some have their MLS, some are in graduate school to obtain their MLS, and some staff hold various other positions in the library. Aside from the head of reference, there does not appear to be a person assigned solely to the reference desk. In this paper I will discuss three aspects through which the observation of this reference environment focused: communication, context, and professional development. I will outline what the literature has to say about communication and context within the reference interview and how the reference staff I observed bore out the theories and tools presented in the literature. I will then discuss issues of professional development in the literature and in the results of my observations and conversations with reference staff at this location.

### *Communication and Context*

Connecting those seeking information with the information they seek often involves a human to human communication event called the reference interview. When discussing initial communication in a reference interview, the goal of “establishing a comfortable relationship” (Grover & Carabell, 1995) is emphasized. This communication interaction – and not the information need itself – is repeatedly cited by Dewdney & Mitchell (1996, 1997) and Ross & Dewdney (1998) as the primary cause for a patron's initiation of a reference interview. A shared context as it relates to communication is what makes “judgments and

actions possible” in an organizational context (Coles & Dougherty, 2009) and “prepares for a cooperative discussion of the real information need” in a reference interview (Dewdney & Mitchell, 1997). Human communication and ever-increasingly human-computer interaction are fundamental themes on which library and information science theory is focused. In libraries people can be observed using computers more than they are observed talking to reference librarians. The reference librarian’s interactions, too, are less often directly with the person, but through the use of instant messaging, email and phone reference services. As a result, non-verbal communication cues critical to establishing shared context in a reference interview are simply absent.

Whether addressing directional, ready reference or research inquiries by phone or in person, the Lawrence Public Library reference staff almost always began the interview by affirming: “Yes, I can help you with that”. With this simple statement, they answer the first three of four unspoken questions that Dewdney & Michell (1996) assert is behind any initial question posed by a patron. These unspoken questions relate to establishing a shared context with the user. The fourth unspoken question, the understanding of the information need itself, is more likely to follow should these first three questions be addressed.

### *Observation*

The Lawrence Public Library has both a reference desk and a main circulation desk located separately within the library. Upon entering the library, the circulation desk is the first desk to the left. But the reference desk is likely the first to be seen by the patron as it is in the direct path facing the entrance. The non-verbal communication barrier that a physical desk presents appears minimal in this case. The desk is low to the ground and computers are located at the outermost edges of the desk. This makes staff highly visible and approachable. The desk location gives staff an additional advantage for a key non-verbal

communication: eye-contact. Since all patrons entering the main area of the library must come towards the direction of the reference desk, staff are able to make eye contact with patrons intending to approach the desk well in advance. The observations of the Lawrence Public Library reference desk occurred on two occasions during peak times between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. The reference staff keep statistics on directional, ready-reference and research related interactions. I will describe each of these types of interactions as I observed them and how they match the theories and tools presented in the literature.

Several directional inquiries regarding the location of tax forms touched on issues of information control. On the Lawrence Public Library reference desk a sign is clearly posted indicating tax forms can be found in the periodical reading area just behind the reference desk. Many patrons approached the desk prepared to ask for directions and then referred themselves through the use of this signage. One particular tax forms, the Homestead Claim Booklet, is located only at the reference desk. This booklet is primarily for low income or disabled persons. Having these forms at the reference desk singles out this population by forcing them to ask staff for the forms. The reasons for controlling information in this way, according to staff, was because of a limited number of copies sent the library by the State of Kansas. The reference staff did not mention, and perhaps were not aware, that this booklet is freely available online (Kansas Department of Revenue). This illogical arrangement, however, is redeemed to some extent by effective avoidance of negative closure. Ross & Dewdney (1998) describe negative closure as an attempt to end the reference transaction before providing a helpful answer. One of their recommended strategies for avoiding this is for library staff to offer a follow-up question, such as: "Come back if you don't find what you're looking for..." On one occasion a reference staff reinforced the information on the tax form signs by gesturing towards the area and telling the patron: "If there's one you need that you don't see, let me know". By doing so he takes a step to avoid negative closure with the patron and potentially avoiding the awkwardness of the patron having to ask for the only form not made freely available.

The second observed interaction was a ready reference question from an elderly woman. This interview highlights a uniquely relevant ready-reference collection and demonstrates how thoughtful communication leads to information discovery and a great customer service experience (Grover & Carabell, 1995). The patron began the interaction rather hesitantly, unsure if her question was answerable. She was looking for the city manager's phone number. The reference staff responded, "Sure, we can see [about that]", assuring the patron that she was in the right place and that the staff could help her. The reference staff successfully found and provided the appropriate information to the patron and the patron responded positively. As she begins packing up her things, the staff continues casual conversation, complimenting her on her bag. On her way out she turns back to ask another question and again indicates that she's not quite sure the library would be able to answer it. Here is the interaction:

*Patron: Erin Brockovich.*

*Staff: Sure, the movie?*

*Patron: Yes, I had her in girl scouts.*

*Staff: Oh! So...did you want the movie or were you looking for her number?*

*Patron: Yes, a number or an address. I'd like to write her a letter.*

*Staff: I think I'll look in the celebrity directory.*

The staff then pulls out the print ready reference source mentioned, finds the entry for Erin Brockovich and shows the patron so she can write it down the address. The patron responds by saying, "Oh, this library! Isn't that amazing?" As an observer, I caught myself wanting to reply with matched amazement. The reference staff showed good client diagnosis, prescription and treatment (Grover & Carabell, 1995) by her interaction in the interview process and by the selection of resources that were very appropriate. While the staff's questioning was mostly closed, she was still able to get at the situation, gap and use of the patron's information need. This shows how establishing context at the onset can go a long way to providing good reference service and meeting information needs.

Finally, a research inquiry exemplifies the challenges of asking or avoiding "why" questions in the reference interview (Dewdney & Mitchell, 1997), diagnosing information needs (Grover & Carabell, 1995), and avoiding negative closure (Ross & Dewdney, 1998). This interaction is like many described in

the literature where the patron assumes the information can be simply located by referring to a general section within the library. Ross & Dewdney (1998) show how patrons can also engage in negative closure by attempting to end the reference interview prematurely. This was exemplified in this scenario. The reference staff made good use of neutral questioning to get at why the patron wanted the information without asking why questions directly. However, the patron continued to insist she would prefer to just browse the section. So, without success in clarifying the information need, the reference staff gets up to help her physically locate the section and possibly help her find some specific sources. This showed a good avoidance of negative closure that the patron was trying to initiate.

### *Professional Development*

In one of my observation sessions, I took advantage of downtime to talk about the issues illustrated in the literature about reference interview skills. Since so many of the interactions I observed of this staff were “by the book” I wondered, as Ross & Dewdney (1998) did, why poor reference transactions still occur and still justify the articles written about them. I asked the staff what core competencies they thought reference staff needed. Ultimately, they felt it was a mix of training and personality that make an effective reference staff. Professional development and competencies of reference librarians have been outlined in a study by Auster & Chan (2004). Personality can be seen as positive behavior competencies identified in that study and include: approachability, interest, listening, effective searching, and follow up. Each of these were represented in my observation of the Lawrence Public Library reference staff.

According to Auster & Chan (2004), one of the most desired professional development activities was the use of technology. When Lawrence Public Library staff were asked about their own professional development training for this role, surprisingly, the main source of training mentioned was a print manual and tour of the library and reference desk. Training centered on reading and research was very common in the mid-eighties. Whereas continuing education workshops, in-house training, and even self-directed

learning projects are among the more recent and popular professional development activities. But, these activities can also be seen among Lawrence Public Library reference desk staff. Most are working in other areas of the library and many are currently in library science graduate programs where self-directed learning projects abound. However, there did seem a need, albeit unexpressed, for the reference staff at Lawrence Public Library to know more about technology. As technical difficulties were encountered, it did not appear that a referral to a technical support staff was a productive option. The remedy by the reference staff was usually some print based or otherwise manual alternative.

### *Conclusion*

Clearly, the reference staff at Lawrence Public Library have very relevant and appropriate interview skills. The staff's user focus is evidenced in their reference interactions and by patron responses. A rethinking of certain policies with this same user focus in mind would be a recommended change. More opportunity for training in the use of technology would be of benefit to both staff and patrons as well. While my focus as a graduate student in library science is in technical services, I see the value reference skills have to all areas of librarianship. It is an indispensable exercise for upcoming librarians to observe and analyze these skills first hand.

References

- Auster, E., and Chan, D. (2004). Reference librarians and keeping up-to-date: a question of priorities. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 44(1), 57-66. Retrieved February 12, 2009 from Emerald database.
- Coles, A., and Dougherty, W. (2009). Hang together or hang separately: improved information services through communication and culture. *C&RL News*, 70(2), 110-113.
- Dervin, D., and Dewdney, P. (1986). Neutral questioning: A new approach to the reference interview. *RQ*, 25(4), 506-513.
- Dewdney, P., and Michell, G. (1996). Oranges and peaches: understanding communication accidents in the reference interview. *RQ*, 35(4), 520-536.
- Dewdney, P., and Michell, G. (1997). Asking "why" questions in the reference interview: A theoretical justification. *Library Quarterly*, 67(1), 50-71.
- Grover, R., and Carabell, J. (1995). Toward better information service: Diagnosing information needs. *Special Libraries*, Winter, 1-10.
- Kansas Department of Revenue. (n.d.). *2008 Kansas Homestead Claim & Property Tax Relief Claim: Form and instructions*. Retrieved February 18, 2009, from <http://www.ksrevenue.org/pdf/forms/k-40hbook08.pdf>
- Ross, C. S., and Dewdney, P. (1998). Negative Closure: Strategies and Counter-strategies in the Reference Transaction. *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 38(2), 151-63.