REFERENCE AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN A MULTI-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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An important aspect of today's librarianship is reference and information services. Extensive studies have been made on the scope and character of the reference librarian's assistance to patrons. Handing the client a book is not the only solution. In the past libraries have been book orientated, centered around the acquisition and preservation of books. Today the emphasis has shifted to the concept of the library as a comprehensive information center and not merely a book supplier. Today's reference librarian must be an information specialist and skilled in interpersonal communication. The point is that face-to-face communication in the library takes place mainly at the reference desk. Personal contact with library users is found at the circulation desk and other library stations, but at the reference desk contact is the order of the day. Hence the value of the present study.

This paper was begun several years ago under the title "Reference Services in a Cross-Cultural Environment." But a survey of the literature and consultation with authorities have shown the present title to be more precise. My bibliography lists the most useful studies on the reference and cultural aspects of the topic.

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General Plan
of
This Study

I. Reference Services
   A. Common sense or hypothetical approach. The qualities that would fit a librarian to work efficiently in a multi-cultural environment.
   B. Analysis of printed sources to back up and substantiate the hypotheses.

II. Cultural Aspects
   A. Speculation on possible attitudes and culture traits which could be found in a multi-cultural student body.
   B. Search of library literature and cultural sources for a more accurate definition of the problem.

III. Cross-Cultural Overview and Conclusions.

Reference Services—General

The common sense approach builds up a list of desirable qualities. It would seem that librarians who are gentle, kind, understanding, good listeners, sympathetic to second language problems and open to other cultures would be generally more successful in a multi-cultural environment. The library patron can be possibly seen as younger, diffident, perhaps embarrassed, with a possible language problem, restricted by behavior codes, unable to formulate the reference problem and without a clearly defined idea of the instructor’s assignment. Let’s see if we can find confirmation for any or all of these hypotheses.

Articles on the general topic abound: “What are Reference Services?” “What is the function of the reference librarian?”
One interesting aspect is the very early appearance of sensitivity to patrons. Galvin's encyclopedia article, "Reference Services and Libraries" (16,212) notes a possible first in this regard. In 1876 Samuel S. Green, librarian of the Worcester, Massachusetts Free Public Library, presented a paper entitled "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers." Green was not familiar with studies on interpersonal relations, but he advised his librarian listeners "to mingle freely with library users." Green's paper is generally recognized as the earliest proposal for the establishment of formalized reference service in libraries. (16,212)

Another historical item has meaning for this paper in that it set up a three fold division of reference work long before the concept of "outreach" was developed. In 1930 James Wyer listed three distinct concepts of reference work: "conservative," "moderate" and "liberal." In the 1960s Rothstein renamed the divisions in terms of aid to library patrons: minimum, middling and maximum. (16,216-220) Without sermonizing it should be clear that in a multi-cultural atmosphere the "maximum" amount of help is usually necessary. Some early writers were against the maximum theory and held that the librarian should point the way only. Wyer summarized the views of the conservatives who held that the librarian should be "scrupulous always to stop short of finding anything and even looking for anything in a book." (16,218) In one form or another these views can be seen today in various schools of reference thought.

Reference Services—Specific

The subject of specific reference services divides easily into attitudes of librarians toward users, problems of users and the reference interview. "Many users would argue that there is a communications barrier between the librarian and the user." (11,11) One of the ways to break down this barrier is the formation of proper attitudes on the part of the reference librarian.
Fjallbrant's *User Education in Libraries* while dedicated to the user cites many points where the librarian's behavior is crucial to the reference transaction. The author cites an early article to show that the student should be "confident that the library staff is competent and willing to help." (11, 14)

One attitude that could well be avoided is the betraying of the natural feeling of superiority over the patron. David Draheim attacks this defect in his humorous article "I never see him come into the library much anymore..." In an informal first person style Draheim satirizes many of the standard ways of lording it over patrons and avoiding actual reference work. He pretends to be busy, mildly annoyed, overly serious and dismisses the enquirer to the card catalog. When this fails he runs through another set of confusing, delaying and down-putting ploys which confuse the questioner and drive him away. As the "I" of the essay, Draheim treats all patrons as opponents, and then as he retreats for a coffee break he wonders, "I never see him come into the library much anymore." Since the article is satiric and ironic it is only necessary to negate the various vices to see what virtues the author recommends.

Horn's approach to the same question: "Why they don't ask questions" is a bit more formal and constitutes a reply to an earlier article by Swope and Katzer "Why don't they ask questions."

Horn expands on the idea of patron and patronage, playing on the words to show the dangers of talking down or looking down on a reference client. He cautions against the habit of looking at all questioners as inferiors. He advises giving just enough information and not too much. The heart of the article is concerned with mutual confidence. The librarian should have sufficient confidence in his own abilities, so as not to be on the defensive. The client should be encouraged to have confidence in himself, the system, and particularly the librarian. Only then can any real exchange of ideas or information take place. The bottom line of Horn's thesis is the assumption that the profession
is dedicated to helping. His final analysis is: "They don’t ask questions because they doubt us and our ability as well as their ability to ask. It is our profession that we are ready and able; they don’t ask questions because they don’t believe it (in many and many a case) any more than we do." (23,233) Horn holds that the competent and self-assured reference librarian will naturally avoid Draheim’s negative attitudes and, as a result, stimulate the necessary confidence in the patron-questioner.

Another librarian orientated article is "Burnout at the Reference Desk." The authors quote a current description of burnout: "a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion, involving the development of negative self-concept, negative job attitudes, loss of concern and feeling for clients." (10,274) The authors list six symptoms: exhaustion, loss of ability to distinguish between productive and non-productive work, rigidity in operating by the book, lack of feedback from patrons or peers, too high expectations of self and patrons, general unawareness of burnout itself.

For the prevention and treatment of burnout the article suggests: shorter work hours, sharing of responsibility, physical exercise, workshops, sense of teamwork, meaningful staff meetings, self analysis of personal motives. The article is stimulating but too general to bring forward any definite attitudes which librarians could adopt.

Communication skills are constantly being brought in to assist the reference librarian. Active listening is one such technique described and applied to library work by Smith and Fitt in their article "Active Listening at the Reference Desk." Passive listening assumes a perfectly correct understanding of the speaker’s message. However, "the person using active listening becomes actively engaged in the process of communication with the speaker (sender). The listener (receiver) of the message attempts to confirm what the message is, by putting his understanding of the message into a tentative statement in his own words, and feeding it back for the sender’s verification." (55,247)
This backward and forward operation tests the librarian's understanding of the patron's problem and helps the patron to formulate his request. Tentative is the key word here and the librarian often just repeats the patron's request but in such a way as to elicit further comment and amplification. Several examples are given and a chart shows the patron encoding the message and, hopefully, the librarian decoding the same.

Reference librarians are aware of the frequently cryptic nature of reference questions and the patron's desire to cloak his request in some way. Active listening, say the authors, will help decode and uncloak so as to reveal the patron's real request. The article gives several examples of how to draw out the hidden agenda. It also cautions against indiscriminate use of the technique. However, it is useful when the patron "is vague in the wording of his question, and where the librarian senses feelings of frustration, anger, or insecurity . . . . We believe that active listening, when properly applied will contribute toward patron satisfaction and the feeling of self worth on the part of the reference librarian." (55,249)

Once communication studies techniques are brought to bear on the reference process the possibilities are endless. Two more examples, Nonverbal Communication and Vertical-Horizontal Relationships will suffice.

We knew it all along in some vague undefined way, but now we have the terms and concepts to describe the effects of gesture, posture and proximity on communication. Joanna Munoz, in her article "The Significance of Nonverbal Communication in the Reference Interview" states: "According to Ray Birdwhistell 65 percent of the social meaning in a two-person communication is carried by the nonverbal bond, only 35 percent by the words spoken. Thus it is readily apparent that during the reference interview the librarian must be attuned to nonverbal cues supplied by the patron." (41,220)

The list of nonverbal clues is extremely long and the addition of nonverbal but audible speech characteristics makes it even
longer. The author limits herself to the more common nonverbal signals: physical distance, orientation, appearance, posture, head nods, facial expression, gestures, looking and paralinguistics. Each item is briefly described and then related to the reference experience. This short article must be read to be appreciated. Any sensitive librarian could give good examples for each item.

One common example frequently encountered in Western-Oriental communication situations is not mentioned by Munoz. It is the positive enforcement of a negative statement: “Yes, I don’t understand.” And this is accompanied by the nonverbal forward head bow instead of the expected side to side negative shake. This can be unnerving to a person not accustomed to the oriental view of things.

This aspect of nonverbal behavior as it applies to Pacific and Oriental students at a multi-cultural university might well be the subject of a workshop in conjunction with faculty members versed in intercultural communication and knowledgeable about the nonverbal aspects of Pacific culture. Munoz also warns librarians that they too are constantly sending out nonverbal messages, and that they should be aware of their own nonverbality and its effect on library users. At any rate “the reference librarian has in conclusion an obligation to become acquainted with the current research in nonverbal communication . . . . Nonverbal communication is not just a matter of common sense . . . . It offers us a means to establish more effective contact between inquirer and librarian.” (41,223)

Smith and Fitt have another article suggesting the use of a sensitivity tool derived from psychology, “Vertical-Horizontal Relationships: Their Application for Librarians.”56 In essence vertical relationships are bad. The vertical librarian is above, looks down, condescends, asserts superiority, and in the end, fails as a librarian. On the other hand horizontal is good and should be practiced. The term refers to “positive, non-threatening interpersonal relationships.” (56, 530) The same reference interview illustrates both relationships, with the horizontal coming
out happily. The authors conclude, "When the horizontal relationship is understood, the librarian will realize that it is more than an attitude which he/she needs to learn and practice; it is a form of communication which can lead to satisfaction and fulfillment." (56, 531)

There is no shortage of advice to librarians, as a glance at the bibliography will show. Howell and others apply the role theory to question negotiation in "Fleeting Encounters—A Role Analysis of Reference Librarian-Patron Interaction." They do not come up with any specific recommendations but do furnish a logical scheme of analyzing the reference encounter. The article ends with two questionnaires, one for the patron and one for the librarian to help in evaluation of the encounter.

"Patrons are almost immediately "turned off" by nervousness, tenseness, scowling, insincerity and bluff," says Ruth P. Hunter in "Reference Service with a Patron Centered Approach." The article owes something to Carl Rogers's theory of "client centered therapy." Hunter suggests that the extrovert librarian provides the better reference service.

Lukenbill's title "The OK Reference Department—Using Transactional Analysis in Evaluating Organizational Climates." is self explanatory. TA encourages and facilitates better communication and so obviously will help the reference process and the reference department. "Library Inreach" by Isaacson discusses the ethical implications of too much librarian-patron interaction. McFayden's "The Psychology of Inquiry" tries to balance the giving of information with the leading toward a learning experience.

Other useful articles listed in the bibliography discuss question negotiation, library use and non-use and self evaluation.

Cultural Aspects
Pacific Attitudes and Culture Traits

In May 1981 I compiled a report on the present topic in which I compiled a list of educational attitudes and Pacific culture traits which might affect reference work. The list is as follows:

1. In general, the people belong to a non-book society.
2. The respect for printed materials is missing in the Pacific area. Books are not the first source of information. (China and Japan are exceptions)
3. It is a non-technological society.
4. The Pacific mind is not the Western mind. Non-inquiring (don’t ask), non-questioning (don’t challenge), non-judging (accept both sides).
5. A lack of interest in, and little knowledge of the huge body of Western common knowledge, geography, history and so on. Even the alphabet can cause problems.
6. Special language difficulties.
7. Logic difficulties. Not all cultures think in the way that Westerners are taught to. This can cause problems with subject catalogs and encyclopedia organization.
8. Respect for elders and persons in authority. This may inhibit questions.
9. Fear of revealing ignorance. Inability to speak even when fear is absent.
10. Hopelessness in the face of a large task or a large body of material.

The list still stands. A few items could be added but a comparison with Waxwood’s study shows that it is basically correct. Dr. Vincenne A. Waxwood, a teaching fellow at the Center for Intercultural Communication at the University of Guam, presented a research paper entitled “Cross-cultural Communication in the Classroom—A Mutual Effort of University of Guam Students and Faculty.” Some of her observations follow: a low level of English comprehension, Pacific students are not accustomed to jokes in an academic setting, some Micronesian students give cues that they understand when they
do not, nodding and smiling do not mean comprehension, some Micronesian students look away from the speaker when they are listening intently, feedback (asking the speaker to explain or repeat) is an undesirable even an insulting behavior for some Micronesians, exaggerated respect for age and authority leads to shyness and reluctance to speak out. Waxwood's insights confirm my own observations. The reference librarian as well as the classroom instructor would do well to be aware of these obstacles in the way of communication.

These problems are by no means peculiar to the Pacific area. Lederman's article "Fear of Talking: Which Students in the Academic Library Ask Librarians for Help?" reveals that even Rutgers University has the problem. "Communication Apprehension" is the term used by Lederman to unify her paper. She eventually concedes that CA or not, library patrons are forced to approach the reference desk. Reference librarians should be aware of such apprehension.

Terry Ann Mood analyzes a problem similar to ours in "Foreign Students in the Academic Library." She discusses ways to ease foreign students' problems of acclimation and suggests ways to help them profit from their academic experience. Many Pacific students entering the university for the first time are coming to a foreign country. Mood recommends library orientation for small homogeneous groups. She notes "foreign students' resentment of being in a dependent position and their fear that they are being pressured to adopt the host culture's norms." The article has many direct tips for the reference librarian in specific situations. "Reference librarians can avoid over explaining and acting oracular, in favor of explaining the use of the book and letting students explore on their own." Mood is generally optimistic and hopeful, noting that librarians have many opportunities for student contact and face-to-face interaction. She concludes: "With some knowledge of their home cultures, some appreciation of their difficulties, and an awareness of the learning methods best suited to them, we can
make a positive difference in their college education.” (40, 180)

Earlier in this paper I speculated on what qualities would fit a librarian to succeed in a multi-cultural environment. Having gone this far in our study and received advice from so many library science sources it might help to see what a communication expert and a cross-cultural specialist have to say. Brislin has compiled a list of traits that would influence the success or failure of a stay in another country. (70, 70) Some of these follow: tolerance toward points of view different from one’s own, positive self-concept, search for information beyond stereotypes, willingness to receive and use feedback from others.

When faced with a multi-cultured student body librarians from any culture will find themselves “in another country.” Even a few of Brislin’s virtues would make life easier for a reference librarian.

Practical Examples

Lest this paper appear too theoretical I will give three examples of my own showing how a reference question negotiation might be adapted to some of our every day conditions. It is taken for granted that all three questioners need much more help than the average student.

1. Q. My teacher told me to get some articles on whales.
   A. Why don’t you look in that last volume of Readers’ Guide. It’s over there, green. Come back and show me what you find.

Comment. The thought of looking through five or six issues of RG may panic the client. Best to help him with how to interpret the abbreviations in one entry and then encourage him to look in a few more volumes.

2. Q. Tides?
   A. Do you have to write a report?
   Q. No, I just have to say something in class next period.
A. Why don't you look in *World Book*. Read a bit of the article and if you need more come to see me.

*Comment.* The inquirer wants the quickest answer and *World Book* often gives just that. If he returns looking for more he could be sent up to *EB* or down to ??.

3. Q. Where can I find an explanation of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"?
   A. Have you tried *Poetry Explication*?
   Q. What?
   A. I've got an idea. We have a lot of books on Frost upstairs. Look up any book on Frost in the Subject part of the Card Catalog. Then go upstairs and find the section. Take down a few of the books on Frost and look in the index in the back. I'm sure you will find "Mending Wall" and a good explanation of the poem. Come back and show me what you found.

*Comment.* The client is learning something just by handling the books on Frost. Later he can learn about indexes and periodical articles.

These examples illustrate how practical applications could be made after assimilating the principles outlined in this paper.

Just as the literature on reference work begins with a philosophy of "What is reference service?" so cross-cultural studies often try to justify their existence, "Cross-culture for what?" The whole point of this paper is to show that more efficient reference work must be based on communication skills and cultural awareness, as well as library professionalism.

More's paper "Communication Studies for Library and Information Studies Students: A Survey of Courses,"105 quotes Jesse Shera who joins all three aspects. "The library is one element in the total communication system by which a society is held together and a culture is created and maintained." (105, 1) More's emphasis is on curriculum and she notes that in the 1970s the Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Texas at Austin began introducing communication skills units into the basic reference course. (105, 12) Her final comment
echoes Shera, "Communication—from interpersonal communication to mass communication and the current communications revolution—is indeed inextricably linked to the practice of librarianship." (105, 11)

John E. Walsh repeats an idea stressed by earlier cultural anthropologists when he theorizes on intercultural education, "Each culture has something to learn from every other." (99, 89) Walsh is looking for global unity and world wide cooperation, but his remarks could be directed toward reference librarians, "Cooperation . . . rests on an awareness of other people and a concern for them as well as for one's self. Cooperativeness is a learned phenomenon, depending very much for its development on seeing its benefits and on a willingness to give as well as to receive." (99, 93)

Sitaram's studies (95 and 96) stress the nature and value of intercultural communication. He points out the fact that culture influences behavior and that the way in which people communicate is influenced by the values they hold. He makes a plea for tolerance of diversity and counsels that the only way to know and appreciate another culture is to study its value system.

This study is by no means complete but I feel that it has brought together a large body of dispersed materials and united them under a single aspect relating to reference work as it exists on this island. Further specialized studies on differing Pacific culture traits should be of great help to university professors and librarians. As it stands I think I have fulfilled my purpose in showing the relationship between culture and communication in the library. I hope that this paper will, in some way, help to improve reference services in our multicultural environment.
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III. ADDITIONAL ENTRIES


LATE NOTE

After I finished this paper on May 30, 1984 I received this 80 page pamphlet:


"This book was written because there isn't anything like it in library literature," says the author. There are many good points in the book, but most have been made elsewhere as I have noted in my paper. The book treats the entire library organization, so reference work occupies only a portion of the text. No articles are quoted and only four Library Science books are quoted or recommended for further reading: Wallace, *Patrons Are People*, 1956; Edsal, *Library Promotion Handbook*, 1980; Katz, *Introduction to Reference Work*, vol. 2, 1982; and Stueart, *Library Management*, 1981. There is a general reference to *RQ*. 