Reference Interview Report  
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Introduction

Today’s libraries are in competition with bookstores and of course the broad shallow fields of Google. My question coming into these reference interviews as observer and participant was whether library staff felt more like people working in a shop, or people serving some mystical invisible force of “knowledge.” As we will see, based on scanty data, the venue of the interaction seemed to make a large difference in this question, though every information professional involved was very professional and polite.

Observation

The observation portion of this report took place in a small branch of a public library. There is one information desk where two different staffmembers (one male, one female) worked for the duration of my observation.

Over two hours the desk was not tremendously busy, giving the staff time to work on other shelving and checking in projects. These projects were occasionally interrupted by patron questions. The work being done wasn't deemed tremendously important and at the first sign of a patron having a question they abandoned the checking in. They answered 20 questions, most of which had to do with the locations of specific books, which, since clarifying questions were asked do count as reference interviews (Ross & Nilsen, 2000: 150).

There were four more in-depth reference interviews during my observation. Three were “Do you have anything on...” kinds of questions, but on specific topics. In those cases, the first question asked by the staffmember was to negotiate the question based on what the information was going to be used for. One question was asked for a junior high school project on Mesopotamia and the other was because a family member needed home care. The male staffmember fielded both of these questions and
immediately after getting the use for the information, he came out from behind the desk and led the patrons to the stacks where they could find appropriate materials. He asked further open questions on the short walks, getting a more information to confirm they were heading to the correct sections. In each case the topics were fairly constrained and the library had a small selection of the books on hand. The staffmember showed them where on the shelf the section of appropriate books began and ended. He asked if that was what they were looking for and told them to come back to the desk if they needed anything else. It was all very textbook. The female staffmember answered a teen looking for comic books with a few questions to determine what kind she was looking for, and when the teen wasn't exactly sure the assistant brought her to the Young Adult comics and set her loose in a fairly unmonitored way (Ross & Nilsen, 2000: 150).

In the locational questions both assistants searched for the information directly on the staff terminal without explicitly saying what they were doing, which might appear to be bypassing the reference interview (Ross & Nilsen, 2000: 151). For these questions, the patrons coming in had titles and authors, so the reference interview didn't feel necessary as a first step for finding the books. Once the assistants had found the book in the library system they invited the patron asking the question around the desk to a position where the screen was more easily visible. This was the time when the staff asked clarifying questions, ensuring they were talking about the same specific books. Both assistants pointed information out on the screen with their fingers, ensuring the patrons weren't confused by the many headings and other extraneous to the patron information. Typically these interviews ended with the staffmember placing a hold for the book in question. On two occasions the staffmember also engaged in a bit of housekeeping circulation information, making sure that phone number and address of the patron were still correct.

On reflection there are a couple of issues with these interactions. On the reference questions the staffmember brought the patrons to the shelves without any attempt at instruction or the reasons why he was taking them where he was. For example, he asked the patron looking for the home care books if
she wanted general books, or books on becoming a home care practitioner, but once they got to the general home-care books he didn't explain where the other options he'd mentioned could be found or how to search the catalogue for them herself.

**User Experience**

I decided to use the same question for both of my user experiences. I was looking for a copy of a poem by Bert Huffman about The Pas, Manitoba that's possibly called Northland. I've been looking for a copy of this poem for a year and a half for a friend of mine whose uncle used to recite it.

**In-Person Experience**

I approached a university library's reference desk and explained that I was looking for a copy of Bert Huffman's poem “Northland” which was published in 1920 (or maybe 1921). I explained I had exhausted my resources and was coming for help. The librarian, an older female, checked if the university had any books by him in the catalogue, and it did not. Then, contrary to most librarians' typical behaviour (Durrance, 1995: 247) she took me to the Canadian poetry indices where we spent twenty minutes browsing volumes that might have reference to Canadian poets in the early twentieth century. She explained where we were going and why we would be looking in two different areas, clearly developing a search strategy and including me in it (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009: 21). When we'd exhausted those indices, we checked the more general poetry volumes, but as Bert Huffman appears to be a very minor poet, she was pessimistic about our chances there. She was not wrong.

Perseverance led us to checking a number of databases and other university holdings via the internet, until eventually she found a project in another province that had some other work by Huffman in it. She also found titles and call numbers of other anthologies that might have something of his in them, though they weren't currently available. Throughout this process she explained where she was checking and how she was checking and told me why she was using the search terms she did. We were both looking at her screen the whole time she was searching databases, making it feel like a
collaborative effort. In the end, she gave me her card and had me write down my information so that if she came up with something later she'd be able to let me know, which was another example of good follow-up work (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009: 21).

There was a clear end to this interaction and encouragement to let her know how it turned out. In general this was a fun interaction. I felt like I was participating in a hunt for information, but being a library student I might not be the most impartial judge of the usefulness of that. If I had needed the poem for a tight deadline, I might have come away from this half hour interaction feeling frustrated since I didn't have the book in my hand. But my “willingness to return” to this librarian who gave me her name was very high (Durrance, 1995: 249)

**Virtual Experience**

For the virtual user experience question I used the Instant Messaging option at a different university library. Again I asked if they had any copies of or information about a poem by Bert Huffman about The Pas, Manitoba. I thought it was either called “Northland” or possibly had the word Northland in the first line. The first thing typed at me from the librarian was “Hold on a minute. I'm with another patron.” It wasn't tremendously auspicious as a user, with its lack of the polite words you usually want in an interaction. And it wasn't the “Please give me a minute to think about your question that Kern (2003: 48) is enamoured with.

When the librarian got back to me its first response was to check standard poetry indexes and databases. Then it informed me it couldn't find anything in the school's databases. Then it said it might be in a book held in their collection. Then it confirmed the title by providing me with the first stanza and then the interaction was done.

Clarity was lacking in this interview. It was never exactly clear if the confirmation of the title of the poem meant it was in the book the librarian had mentioned, since in that part of the interview it had referred to a poem called Desolation.” As is common in virtual interviews (Kern, 2003: 49), no open-
ended questions were asked by the librarian in our interview. Once I was told (after a followup clarifying kind of question on my part) the librarian would search the databases, but I sat for minutes without any indication of what was going on on the other side of my screen. The librarian also did not ask if I was satisfied with the information (though I indicated I would come down to the library the next day to find the book it thought might have the poem in it), and didn’t bring the interview to a close with any sort of welcoming future interaction “ask any time” conclusion (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009: 22).

Once the librarian came back with information I could tell it was a person and I wasn't typing into a void, but before that I felt slightly abandoned and like I was imposing. What may have been a very helpful suggestion to check poetry indexes if it had been delivered in a friendly tone of voice by a person came off cold and condescending to me. I wondered if that was a standard canned response used whenever anyone had a poetry question. I’ve been referring to the librarian in this case as an “it” because I had no sense of it as a person. Before this interaction I scoffed lightly that emoticons were useful in virtual reference interviews but perhaps there could be a point to those methods of compensating for the nonverbal nature of the interaction (Radford, 2006: 1051). There was a touch of rapport building (Radford, 2006: 1050) when the librarian confirmed the title of the poem. The humanity came from the librarian saying it sounded like it might be a new favourite, but coming at the end of the interview it didn't facilitate a building relationship. The lack of clarity and fact that it was a virtual interview possibly indicating the hard copy book was in a physical collection (which I had no access to, being several provinces away) made the information value of this interaction hard to judge.

**Conclusion**

The reference interactions I witnessed and were a part of were not horror stories by any means. Most of the information professionals involved were polite and had good customer service skills. If I were judging from these few observations, I would say today's library staff are very aware of their role
as customer servants and work towards fulfilling that goal than being protectors of their collections or harbourers of secret knowledge.
Bibliography


