

THE ART OF THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of the process known as the reference interview has been with the library profession for some time, although in various guises. Researchers have admirably traced the gradual development of this concept which is central to the existence of libraries—providing information.^{1,2,3} I will outline briefly the development of the reference interview and place it in its proper perspective. I will then outline a framework for library practitioners and library educators to use in improving the quality of reference service.

The earliest serious attempt to outline the reference process and what it entailed was by Samuel Green⁴ in 1876. His classic study provided the then fledgling American library profession with a description of what reference service should involve. His precepts, while condescending to today's library patron, were reflective of the state of the art in 1876 and were to remain extremely influential in reference thought and theory until well into the twentieth century. His view of the reference process was to provide minimal help to

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the helpless by supplying "wholesome books".⁵ Judged in all fairness, Green does supply us with a role model when he advocates that we "Receive investigators with something of the cordiality displayed by an old-time inn-keeper".⁶

The concept of reference service which Green endorsed became known as Readers Advisory Services, or matching the person with the "right" book. This preoccupation with *books*, rather than the *person*, or *even information*, was to dominate library thinking until very recently. Vavrek caustically described this preoccupation as librarians becoming "walking Winchell's,"⁷ an epithet which we could now update and call "shuffling Sheehy's." Certainly a thorough knowledge of information sources (books, computer bases, etc.) is important—even crucial—to providing reference service, but it is not the only area where the training of reference librarians should center. I would go so far as to say, that knowledge of information sources is only half of the training needed for reference librarianship; the other half is knowledge of reference interview skills combined with a natural ability to help people.

I am not the first, and hopefully not the last, to advocate that there is more to reference service than knowledge of information sources. Woodruff as early as 1897 equated the concepts of reference interview skills and knowledge of reference materials,⁸ but her observations went largely unheeded. She was followed by Wyer,⁹ Flexner,¹⁰ and Hutchins,¹¹ all of whom provided guidelines for the very general attributes required of reference librarians. Yet, while these authorities recognized that there is more to reference work than knowledge of books, there was little concrete guidance given for practicing or aspiring librarians to follow. While being alert, friendly and attentive (Flexner), or having common sense and straightforwardness (Wyer), or possessing suitable personal factors (Hutchins), may be considered truisms, they never quite achieved the status of models needed for the improvement of reference service.

The development of such models of the reference interview would depend upon the interdisciplinary approach advocated by Hutchins and established by David Maxfield¹² using counseling techniques, Jack Delaney¹³ using social work and journalism models, Lee Anderson¹⁴ using psychology theories and Robert Taylor¹⁵ and Patrick Penland¹⁶ using communications theory. Since the pioneering work of these individuals a generally accepted belief that there is more to reference than reference books has developed. Recent library literature abounds with articles examining, codifying, dissecting and diagraming what proports to be the scientific examination of what occurs in a reference encounter. While the profession is indebted to the efforts of Taylor¹⁷ and Jahoda¹⁸ in explaining how

we communicate with patrons and vice versa, remarkably little of this theoretical base or of other less scientific models has been incorporated into programs of pre- or in-service library education. Lip-service is given to the importance of communication skills in library education programs, but little of a substantive nature is being done to incorporate reference interview skills into the traditionally book-oriented library school curriculum. There are notable exceptions,¹⁹ but they are the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many teachers of reference have not had firsthand experience with the reference interview; possibly curricular demands rule out any other approach; conceivably it is the difficulty of teaching more than just the straightforward reference book approach; or, perhaps it is the difficulty of coming to grips with the *art* of reference. Most likely, it's all of these possibilities.

ART VS SCIENCE

The word "art" rather than "science" in the title of this article is deliberate. It is a more accurate term for the entire process undertaken in providing information for library patrons than is the term "science." It is not that I view the process as less worthy because it is not entirely scientific. Surely the art of Michaelangelo or Picasso is as equally important as the science of Newton or Descartes, albeit for different reasons.

For the purpose at hand we can define art as "a specific skill in adept performance, conceived as requiring the exercise of intuitive faculties that cannot be learned solely by study."²⁰ If we analyze the elements of this definition in terms of the reference interview, we can isolate several important concepts. The first element tells us that there are specific skills of performance which need to be developed if the reference interview is to become an art. We could describe the reference interview, then, as a performing art. I think this is a valid description of the process undertaken in reference situations; yet, it is a description generally met with disdain by many of my professional colleagues. (This skill component is, parenthetically, the area in which scientific principles can most realistically be applied as discussed later in this article).

The second element of our definition establishes the concept that there are in operation during the "art" of the reference interview, intuitive faculties that cannot be learned solely by study. This is an important concept. This is where we separate the wheat from the chaff; the superior reference librarian from the functionally adequate reference librarian. This is also where the reference interview becomes art and not science.

Science, on the other hand, and its inherent scientific methodology, is based on the assumption that natural and scientific phenomena can, with the presence of identical elements, be replicated with the same results over and over again. However, in a reference situation given the constant elements of librarian, patron and question, the results may not always be identical. Even if the question being asked is the same, the required answer may be different for each request. For example: "I would like to locate descriptive information about Bolivia." The answer required might be statistical, historical, sociological, geographical, biographical or all of these. The skill in adept performance of discovering what the patron requires and the proper exercise of intuitive faculties will lead to the satisfying of each patron's informational needs.

Describing the reference interview process as an art does not deny that there are some portions of the process to which scientific principles or theories can be applied. Why are we splitting hairs and debating whether the reference interview is an art or science? Perhaps it would be best to compromise and to describe the process as a "scientific art" or an "artistic science," but that obviously begs the question. The choice of terminology is significant because of the subtle effect that over describing and over formalizing of dynamic human interaction has had on the profession. Complete understanding of the reference interview has been slow in coming to the education of librarians because it is frequently viewed as so much theoretical gobbledygook by erudite professors making "much ado about nothing." The subtle, negative effect that scientific analyzing of the human interaction elements within the reference interview has on a profession of practitioners has not often been verbalized in print, but it is nevertheless prevalent.

If the reference interview is an art as outlined in the above definition, we then can, by definition, identify those areas for which "skills in adept performance" can be described and taught as well as those areas "requiring the exercise of intuitive faculties that cannot be learned solely by study." The remainder of this article will attempt to accomplish that task.

REFERENCE INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK: SKILLS

In an article in *The Journal of Education for Librarianship*,²¹ twelve verbal and non-verbal skills considered necessary for reference interview situations were identified, described and discussed as one model of teaching reference. Since the publication of that article, I have attempted to refine and/or restructure the following skills, but the list has been capable of standing the test of time. It would be

helpful to review these skills and to note the ease or difficulty with which these skills are mastered in order to isolate those skills which need the most developmental work in pre- and in-service library education efforts.

Interviewing Skills For Librarians

Nonverbal Behavior

1. Eye Contact
Keep eye contact with the patron throughout the interview. Vary the eye contact so that you do not appear to be staring.
2. Gestures
Match your gestures to what you are saying. Try to keep nervous and distracting habits under control (nail biting, pencil tapping, etc.)
3. Relaxed Posture
Relax physically. Use body movements that show you are interested in what the patron is saying and feeling.
4. Facial Expression ; Tone of Voice
Reflect the mood of the patron in your facial expressions. Your tone of voice and expression should make your comments believable.

Verbal Behavior

5. Remembering
Listen! Remember what the patron says so that you do not have to keep asking for the same information and so that you can put things together to determine exactly what the patron wants.

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| 6. Premature Diagnosis | Do not make assumptions about the patron's status or problems. Get all the necessary information before sizing the patron up. |
| 7. Reflect Feelings Verbally | Try to accurately reflect and interpret the patron's comments and feelings. |
| 8. Restate or Paraphrase Comments | Try to feedback the content of what the patron is saying. |
| 9. Open Questions | Questions require more than a "yes" or "no." Give the patron an unlimited choice of answers. |
| 10. Encouragers | Do not respond at length to every statement the patron makes. Use short phrases such as Oh! Then? So? "Give me an example" to keep the patron talking. |
| 11. Closure | Do not cut the patron off, change the subject, or interrupt a patron at an inappropriate time or in a manner that would offend him. |
| 12. Opinions, Suggestions | Do not force your own opinions on the patron and avoid making suggestions in the form "If I were you, I would. . ." |

It should be pointed out that these skills are not scientific in the true sense of that term. Yet they are identifiable and they are capable of being refined and enhanced by every individual who wishes to exert the necessary time and effort. Some are more easily improved upon than others.

My observations of the approximately 150 students who have gone through the reference interview skills education process indicate that the vast majority of people need little help in the area of kinesics or nonverbal behavior. These skills seem to have been acquired during the students' normal culturalization process. Most people

exhibit appropriate "posture," "gestures," "facial expressions," and "tone of voice." While these skills may have been developed previously in social settings, positive reinforcement and practice in professional settings is certainly important.

Eye contact is the only nonverbal skill that most needed to develop more completely. The initial eye contact of looking at someone while you are talking to them is a generally accepted personality trait. It is, however, the maintaining of eye contact and level eye contact that presents some problems. The maintaining of eye contact during a search is important in order to let the patron know that you are aware of their presence. Frequently, the librarian becomes so engrossed in the search that their eyes never leave the page and any subsequent conversation involves talking to the pages of the book rather than the patron. An occasional glance at the patron will serve to re-establish contact and evidence of human interaction. The other problem area of eye contact involves level eye contact. That is to say that the eye level of patron and librarian should be the same. If the patron is standing and the librarian is sitting we create an unnecessary situation of master-servant relationships. Equal level of eye contact will enhance the positive level of rapport necessary for good reference interviewing.

Likewise, several of the verbal skills present little difficulty once their importance for professional situations has been discussed. "Closure" and "Opinions, Suggestions" are, again, the products of our culturalization processes.

To a greater extent "Premature Diagnosis," "Encouragers," and "Reflecting Feelings Verbally" are more difficult skills to develop. This appears to be due to the role image which librarians seem to have of themselves and of reference situations. We tend to be more formal (professional is a frequently used synonym) than is necessary or even desirable. In Carl Rogers work with personality and human interaction he notes that ". . . to withhold one's self as a person and to deal with the other [person] as an object does not have a high probability of being helpful."^{2 2} Jourard also discussed this concept which he described as "character armour" in order to hide a person's real self and to protect one from possible hurt from the outside.^{2 3} If we are not being our true selves at the reference desk, then we run the very real risk of interjecting barriers which stand in the way of satisfying a patron's informational needs.

The library education program should in no way attempt psychological behavior modification, but should make students aware of the ways in which behavior affects relationships with patrons. Perhaps more attention might be given to Holland's suggestion ". . . that tests [of social intelligence as well as intelligence tests] . . . be administered to individuals applying for library work

in areas such as reference where interpersonal competence is essential."^{2 4}

The most difficult skills to teach are "Remembering," "Open Questions," and "Restating or Paraphrasing Comments." It is ironic that these are the areas which have received the most scientific scrutiny. "Remembering is closely linked with concentration and listening. Listening and remembering are aural aptitudes which, in our modern society, are not as highly developed as they once were. It has been my observation that reference students selectively listen to a query until some word or concept makes contact with an information source they know; then they stop listening and wait for a suitable conversational opening so they can run and get a book. The skill of listening and analyzing all of the information being given by a patron and then, and only then, going to an information source is initially difficult for many beginning librarians and even many seasoned veterans.

"Open Questions" is the area that, in my experience, has been the hardest element to teach. This is due to the simple fact that it is very difficult to react quickly and intellectually to often vague, incomplete and/or unfamiliar information provided by patrons. It takes a great deal of practice, preferably in simulated situations to think on one's feet. It takes closely working with in-service librarians to define, refine and incorporate into their reference style open questions which can be used for a variety of reference queries. In all honesty, this process of asking open questions in order to negotiate a reference query can only be taken so far due to the unique nature of each reference query. This is where one's intuitive faculties, the art of reference, comes into play.

Closely related to open questioning is the final element of our battery of skills, "Restating or Paraphrasing the Comments." This is a simple but crucial skill. It provides the librarian and the patron with an opportunity to make sure they both know what information they are seeking. It is interesting to observe communication in both social and professional situations where while two people are conversing each has a different interpretation of what the other has said. A simple restatement of the information sought can save much time and provide better reference service.

REFERENCE INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK:

INTUITIVE FACULTIES

As mentioned above, the use of open questions involves the ability to think on your feet to be analytical to be resourceful. I don't believe this is something that can be taught in library education programs. We expect students to come to us with this innate ability.

If they don't possess it, there is little we can do within the confines of education programs to develop this ability. While teaching reference interview skills can improve students abilities to a degree, the intuitive faculties which the student already possesses will not be significantly affected. Likewise, when the student becomes a professional, the daily demands of the work situation leave little time to develop skills or abilities not previously possessed. While experience is certainly a good teacher, the experience can tend to reinforce existing skills as well as expand one's reference repertoire. It behooves library educators to adequately prepare students for the reference interview before they enter the work force as well as to provide realistic library career guidance. Everyone in library school is not reference librarian material.

The attitude which the reference librarian has of reference work also falls within the domain of the art of reference. In addition to maintaining a philosophy or attitude towards reference work, the reference librarian must develop a positive attitude about him/herself, his/her abilities, his/her work, and the way in which she/he interacts with others. The attitude must encompass the belief that reference is a service to which each and every patron is entitled. The attitude that, as reference librarians, we are giving our time and our knowledge rather than that our time is being taken needs to be ingrained into the fiber of every librarian. In addition, we must develop the essential attitudes of pleasant and courteous service. In short, complete reference service in its broadest sense, includes those intangible, largely personal qualities that make reference work an art.

CONCLUSIONS

The ramifications of my observations present serious questions for both the library education community and for practicing librarians.

Obviously what I am suggesting is an over-haul of the prevailing mode of teaching only reference books. The quality of the students who are products of the solely book-oriented programs are varied and show little evidence of quality control in producing complete reference librarians. Fortunately, nearly all of the products of our education programs are technically adequate, i.e., they evidence good knowledge of books. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for their ability to effectively interview and negotiate reference questions. This is not to say that, given suitable training, the present inadequate situation could not be changed to incorporate both a thorough knowledge of information sources and a thorough know-

ledge of reference interview techniques. Of course, there are many examples of graduates of book oriented reference courses who are truly exceptional reference librarians. Regrettably, this is more the result of chance and their own innate ability than the result of their professional preparation.

The advent of computer data bases and other information sources also leads one to question whether the present book bound curriculum will be able to meet the demands of the immediate future. If, in the next several years, librarians at all levels find themselves working with patrons while using more sophisticated material sources than books, will not training in the art of reference become increasingly important? Training in the techniques of the reference interview will remain valid regardless whether information is being retrieved from books or from data bases, but the same cannot be said for solely book oriented reference courses. The choices for the future seem reasonably clear; yet most library education programs do not adequately reflect the rapidly changing nature of the profession and the central role which reference interview skills have to play.

In terms of the working professional, the development of individual or group in-service/continuing education programs is to be advocated. Ideally, such programs would be done over a period of weeks with adequate opportunities for mutual feedback after using newly learned skills on the job. Less than ideal, but more pragmatic programs could be conducted in a shorter period of time. These programs must be conducted by individuals experienced with the teaching of reference interview techniques. Those few library education programs with strong reference interview components can be of invaluable service to the entire profession in this regard. Library organizations and associations interested in developing in-service/continuing education programs must seek out qualified, capable consultants.

The question might well be asked, "Isn't this more theoretical goddledygoon which you yourself denigrated?" I think not. My reasoning is threefold. First, if the reference department is understaffed and you cannot provide adequate service, then it seems to me that a good case could be made for increased staff or the rearrangement of present staff. Second, if all we can provide is minimal, perfunctory service, perhaps all that is needed is a professional staff. If reference librarians are to be considered professionals and if there is to be a marked difference between professional service and non-professional service, then there is a need to provide the type of service that only a skilled professional can provide. Third, if professional reference librarians do not provide total reference service, libraries will lose the right to expect verbal and financial support from their various constituencies. If reference librarians don't take

the time necessary to negotiate reference queries thoroughly, are they worthy of the support they receive? Do library patrons deserve anything less than complete service? Obviously, the answer is to provide complete, professional reference services. In order to train future reference librarians and to help professionals in the field, I strongly advocate a more thorough understanding and utilization of "the art of reference," and then reference service will achieve its maximum potential for service to library patrons, a challenge within our future.

Notes

¹ Elaine Zaremba Jennerich, "Microcounseling in Library Education," diss. University of Pittsburgh, 1974, pp. 5-18.

² Samuel Rothstein, "Across the desk: 100 years of reference encounters," *Canadian Library Journal*, 34 (October 1977), 391-399.

³ Robert Wagers, "American Reference Theory and the Information Dogma," *Journal of Library History* 13 (Summer 1978), 265-281.

⁴ Samuel Swett Green, "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers," *Library Journal* 1 (October 1876), 74-81.

⁵ Green, pp. 74-79.

⁶ Green, pp. 80.

⁷ Bernard F. Vavrek, "The Emergence of New Reference," *The Journal of Education for Librarianship* 10 (Fall 1969), 109.

⁸ Eleanor B. Woodruff, "Reference Work," *Library Journal* 22 (Conference Number, 1897), 67.

⁹ James Ingersoll Wyer, *Reference Work* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1930), pp. 95-114.

¹⁰ Jennie M. Flexner and Sigrid A. Edge, *A Reader's Advisory Service* (N.Y.: American Association for Adult Education, 1934), pp. 5-11.

¹¹ Margaret M. Hutchins, *Introduction to Reference Work* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1944), pp. 21-29.

¹² David K. Maxfield, *Counsellor Librarianship: A New Departure*, University of Illinois Graduate Library School Occasional Papers, No. 38, March 1954.

¹³ Jack Delaney, "Interviewing," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 29 (December 1954), 317-318.

¹⁴ Lee W. Anderson, "Reference Librarians and Psychology," *Library Journal* 81 (May 1, 1956), 1058-60.

¹⁵ Robert S. Taylor, "Question Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 29 (May 1968), 178-94.

¹⁶ Patrick R. Penland, *Interviewing for Reference and Readers Advisory Librarians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970) and *Communication for Librarians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1971).

¹⁷ Taylor, pp. 178-94.

¹⁸ Gerald Johoda, *The Process of Answering Reference Questions: A Test of A Descriptive Model*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1977).

¹⁹ Edward J. and Elaine Zaremba Jennerich, "Teaching the Reference Interview," *The Journal of Education for Librarianship* 17 (Fall 1976), 106-111.

²⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 74.

²¹ Jennerich and Jennerich. See also above reference to Jennerich, Elaine.

²² Carl R. Rogers, "The Characteristics of a Helping Relationship," *Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays and Readings on Human Interaction*, ed. Warren G. Bennis, et.al., (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1968), p. 295.

²³ Sidney M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self* (N.Y.: Van Nostrand, Reinhold, 1971), p. 112.

²⁴ Barron Holland, "Updating Library Reference Service through Training for Interpersonal Competence," *RQ* 17 (Spring 1978), 209.