Ideas, Hints, and Tips: Over and Out: Effectively Assessing the End of a Reference Interview

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Over and Out: Effectively Assessing the End of a Reference Interview

By Jewell Anderson

At our university library, students sometimes do not approach the reference desk until they are at what I’ve bastardized and like to call “Defcon Four” — for our purposes, that is one away from the fateful, code-red, “five” and yet well along the way of anxiety, frustration, and increasing insecurity that unsuccessful research attempts engender. Deflating the situation is the obvious first step and usually involves allowing the student to express frustration, then conveying sympathy and understanding. Beyond that, and after appropriate information needs are met, how can a reference librarian easily assess whether or not a student is emotionally “done” and feeling confident and competent in their skills?

After too many experiences wherein it was clear to neither myself nor the student that our research session had run its course and was complete, I have developed the eminently useful habit of gently asking, at the end, or what I think may be the end, “and so now you feel…?” and let the student fill in the blank. I’ve learned that anything less than a boisterous “much better!” is my cue to keep the reference interview going.

Recently this has held true with a student who was working toward a research topic. As we discussed it and came to a place wherein the student was down to three good, potential topics, I asked the question and got a sheepish “uh, okay I guess” at which point I knew to continue our conversation. With tenacity, and an extra few minutes the enthusiastic affirmative was achieved after we had narrowed it down to the one most interesting topic.

By introducing the language of “feeling” to the interaction, one can express both recognition and acceptance of the student’s feelings and the significant impact those feelings have. What is noteworthy regarding this particular phrasing is that it differs from “do you feel better?” for a couple of important reasons. First, closed questions are rarely preferable in reference encounters; second, the open-ended question affords recognition of feelings and more importantly does not presume that one ever felt “bad.” Because even if that was the perception, no one likes to hear that they seemed to be at Defcon Four. Finally, introduction of this language also acts as an effective cue for the student; if they answer in the resounding affirmative, vocalization serves as the motive for them to depart the reference desk and return to their own work stations with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.

So, the next time you find yourself ten minutes into a reference interview safely back from an emotionally charged precipice, and you’re thinking “ok, we’ve got you some sources, you’re clearly better off than you were” about a student who shows no sign of budging, open the door to them expressing their feelings. That expression will undoubtedly illuminate the path to come and help ensure positive emotional and academic outcomes for all parties.

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