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Is There a Next For Reference Librarians?

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Abstract

In this opinion piece four reference librarians at a medium sized academic library in Louisiana, describe their experience with an unanticipated effect of educational technology (online computers) and their recommendations for taking advantage of this effect. This paper makes a case for teaching as the new occupation for reference librarians.

Introduction

It should be understood from the beginning, as a means of reiterating the abstract, that this article is not based on research in the traditional sense. It is, instead, an anecdotal piece describing the field experience of four seasoned librarians with an even 100 years of practicing librarianship. Our conclusions, while not based on "scientific" evidence, represent our analysis of a problem based on observations of student behavior, reinforced by informal conversations with our peers around the state of Louisiana.

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Just a decade ago Watson Library's Reference Division was the epitome of a small, traditional university library. Students and the occasional faculty member came to the library and used the card catalog and several print indexes to locate the information they wanted. Reference librarians expected to handle approximately 17,000 fairly substantial questions during the academic year (from Watson Library Reference Division's Annual Report). We were quite proud of the fact that a professional reference librarian was on duty all the hours that the library was open. Life was orderly, and the reference

division faculty was comfortably busy; its place in the grand scheme of university organization was recognized and appreciated. Little in the way of change was anticipated.

Although Watson Library has had standalone workstations and telnet terminals since the mid 1980's, the advent of twenty-seven web-based databases in 1999 marked a definite change in reference services. From that point onward life has been anything but comfortable. As the number of online databases provided by LOUIS (formerly the Louisiana Online University Informational Systems, now Louisiana Library Network) expanded simultaneously with the increase in distance education classes, the number of reference questions plummeted as did the intellectual quality of those questions. In order to help our students and faculty with these new systems, the reference faculty began an accelerated program of library instruction, created an electronic instruction lab, and developed handouts and users manuals describing how our students and faculty could access these databases from home, or from wherever they could get access to a computer.

Interlibrary loan requests could also be initiated from remote locations, and patrons were notified by telephone or e-mail when the requested items were available for pickup. There was no need to come to the library and complete a form – in fact, paper forms were done away with altogether. The only reason students had to come to the library was to check out books. Clearly, Watson Library had joined the information age.

The result of this new technology, combined with the Reference Division's clever and unremitting methods of demonstrating how it could be used from outside the library, has been spectacularly successful; unfortunately, in ways we had never anticipated. Reference questions have declined by three-fourths, and the number of students who come to the library has also declined proportionally. The situation was further exacerbated by the installation of a computer laboratory (but not as an actual part of the library) for the use of students wanting to access

the Internet, e-mail, and to print out class assignments. Many students who “come to the library” are, in fact, coming to the computer laboratory to type papers, check email, surf the Internet, enter chat rooms, and play games.

Ironically, the book budget, as well as funds for journal subscriptions, has been more generous than ever in the history of Watson Library due to the state legislature providing “Enhancement Funds” to academic libraries. The Reference Division is literally awash in new reference books, most of which have never been opened.

In the fall of 2002, the reference faculty met to analyze and discuss this paradoxical situation. We had finally become fed up with staring at spaces largely devoid of students and faculty. Of particular concern was the decline in substantial inquiries from students. Answering reference questions was replaced by putting paper in printers and providing directions. The obvious issue was whether students had become so proficient in the use of the library’s databases that they no longer felt it necessary to consult a reference librarian. Also in question was whether the faculty, for some unknown reason, had stopped giving work assignments that required the resources of a library to complete.

These concerns were further enhanced by a survey the reference faculty sent to the teaching faculty of Northwestern State University. Some of the results from the brief, Likert-type questionnaire which 45% of the faculty returned made some interesting points:

- First, most faculty believed that formal library instruction is useful.
- Second, a significant majority of faculty continue to assign projects that can be completed only with the use of library resources, and
- Third, a very large majority feels that reference librarians are indispensable when using the library for research purposes.

This relatively positive information was offset to a certain extent by the fact that only one-third of the faculty responding had scheduled an instructional session during that semester.

One would reasonably think that if the faculty considers library instruction so useful, instructors

would take the initiative and schedule a class in the library. We do not know why this peculiarity exists. It may simply be that the faculty is not aware that we give library instruction in all areas. Or instructors may just not get around to making an appointment. They may assume students are getting adequate library instruction in orientation classes. In any case, the library has hired an Instructional Services Librarian who began work in the fall of 2003. The job description specifically requires visits to all departments for the purpose of making certain the faculty know that subject matter instruction in all areas is available for the asking, and to seek the faculty’s advice regarding resources to be emphasized. We, as librarians, urged the revamping of this position on the assumption that the library should put more personnel and resources into teaching students, and to some extent the faculty, how to use the elements of research and educational technology with all their ramifications for library applications.

Recognizing that the major responsibility for the development of academic skills rests with the teaching faculty, we also recognize that librarians can play a much more prominent role in this development.

Whether we can make teaching a primary task for reference librarians remains to be seen, but we do know that in general, most of our students show an astonishing ignorance of how to do “good research.” Quite frankly, we thought most of our students would know a lot more about computers and some of the more imaginative ways to use them, but that has proven to be a very false assumption.

Rooting around on the Internet is a far cry indeed from working through the ordered search engines that characterize proprietary databases such as InfoTrac. Students’ main source of difficulty with proprietary systems likely stems from the wide and easy availability of remotely accessible databases that allow students to bypass the library and the guidance of librarians.

For example, students with an assignment find it comparatively easy to print out two or three articles at home, which they—so we suggest—patch together for a research paper. The problem, or one of the larger problems, is that the articles often have little coherent relationship with the thesis of the assignment. If the subject is the writings of William Faulkner, one article

chosen may deal with *The Bear*, another with *Light in August*, and yet another with *As I Lay Dying*. These articles are then used irrespective of their applicability to the given topic. We see this problem with many of the students we help to use the databases: they want x-number of articles on the given subject and usually print off the first full-text articles they find.

Careful analysis of literature is ignored in these circumstances, and undergraduates, usually in a hurry or late with assignments, are merely taking advantage of the convenience afforded by full-text databases. At the same time, it is little wonder that plagiarism is fast becoming a national scandal in higher education. Moreover, particularly galling is seeing the marvelous convenience of online databases used so poorly and with such limited creative utility. But if students have not been properly instructed in the correct methods they just will not know any better.

The evidence we have collected cannot be regarded as particularly scientific, but from a practical point of view it appears to the reference faculty of Watson Library that a vastly enlarged teaching responsibility is an evolving role for reference librarians. And while we can currently make a significant contribution to the general knowledge of freshmen and perhaps some upper-division students, our work will be spotty at best. In 2002, the reference faculty taught 121 50-minute sessions of library instruction with a total of 3,319 students in attendance, roughly half of all students attending the Natchitoches campus (from the Watson Library Reference Division's Annual Report, 2002).

Most of these sessions were introductory English 1010 and 1020 classes, and it is clear enough that if we wanted to teach more students in greater depth, we would need release time for preparation and teaching.

But before that is likely to happen, all libraries facing our dilemma—and we suspect it is becoming common among smaller academic libraries—will need a sanction or mandate from the library profession to offer full-time library instruction as a required course and as a means of dealing purposefully with the residual time now available to reference librarians.

We would like to see library schools and the Association of College and Research Libraries

take a position on this issue, and one that agrees with our sense of reality. The 2000 and 2001 statements by ACRL on information literacy (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>) point the way for the adoption of information literacy policies, but we are suggesting that reference librarians would be the ones most suitable to teach these classes.

Armed with the right kind of sanction, it would seem possible for librarians to approach their various academic officers and make a strong case for teaching library instruction full time, beginning with required courses for Freshmen.

Unfortunately, if we are to judge from personal contacts with other librarians in the field, our profession as a whole—but especially library schools—seem blissfully oblivious to the dilemma we have identified above. The candidates we have interviewed for reference positions from a number of library schools indicate that if the question has come up in classes it was not discussed in any way that stuck with them.

From the perspective of field librarianship, the curriculums of library schools appear to be losing their cohesion. The core curriculums do not seem to be addressing the shift in reference from traditional reference work to library instruction. Furthermore, students often swap off course work in traditional librarianship for course work in computers and the Internet, aiming for careers in the computer industry because that is where better salaries are found. However, they may end up in traditional libraries unprepared for the reality they will face. Any library school offering course work in both areas will inevitably create a situation where some students are greatly over-prepared or seriously under-prepared, and this will manifest itself more clearly when new graduates attempt to enter the job market. To put it bluntly, it seems to us that in their love affair with technology, library schools have failed to recognize a problem, and a need, that is the result of that very same technology. Library instruction, in a formal sense, has been ignored.

The point of all this is that new graduates into the profession of library work will find themselves in a state of shock if they expect reference services to be the same as they were

just a few years ago. Library schools, in our opinion, should begin to prepare students for a workday world by responding to the pervasiveness of educational technology, and by that we mean the ubiquitous computer--not just how to use the computer but how to teach others to use it.

The short and long-term effects of computer technology are present, here and now, and they have the capacity for destroying reference services as we have known them for decades. Given the preference of younger library patrons for using computers, this development is probably inevitable, and probably even good for our profession, but only if the transition is characterized by a modicum of common sense.

And the question still remains: what do we do with all those underutilized reference librarians?

Our most succinct answer is that librarians, particularly reference librarians, should become active participants in the teaching of information literacy with emphasis on the applied use of library databases and research tools and their classroom applications. We see this as a charge to others who are experiencing the phenomenon of dropping reference questions and declining patron numbers. Those looking to fill this void might be able to do so through greater

involvement in institution-wide information literacy initiatives and still be able to fulfill their professional obligations. We also believe that the ready availability of electronic library resources in the academic environment has created an opportunity for librarians to expand what has hitherto been a somewhat passive role in "supporting" classroom instruction into a more cooperative and high profile one. Librarians now have the time and the tools to actively influence all subjects and curricula through such activities as providing content for online courses, developing interactive web-based instruction, assisting professors in developing effective research assignments and providing in-depth library instruction sessions for upper level classes. These tasks will all require the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, each of which will contribute to our view of the new and different reference librarian.

There may be other solutions, but many of us are not interested in turning our libraries into variations of Starbucks or PJ's coffee houses, nor does "virtual reference" or "digital reference" seem to have much promise for filling our time.

We recommend this subject for further discussion, hopefully by our professional organizations and library schools.