Reference Revitalization and Roving Reference: Are the Reference Desk and Print Reference Sources Passé?

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Reference Revitalization and Roving Reference:

Are the Reference Desk and Print Reference Sources Passé?

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ABSTRACT

Print reference sources and reference desks are still vital parts of reference service in some libraries, while in others innovative models such as roving reference and learning commons thrive. While undergraduate students’ preferences and usage has shifted from print to electronic, students still need to learn the application of metacognitive thinking skills in library research. Updating how reference is delivered to accommodate students’ emphasis on mobility and expectation of access to information has led to revitalizing reference collections, reconfiguring space as learning commons and roving reference as solutions at Taylor University and Palm Beach Atlantic University, while Whitworth University retains a more traditional configuration to meet student research needs.

Librarians who have been in the profession for some time have surely noticed the shift in usage patterns, particularly in the format of reference sources students prefer. But their professors are not necessarily pleased with the results of this shift. Professors are often displeased that their students’ work fails to demonstrate the quality of research and synthesis of thought they desire (Mahaffy, 2006, p. 324). While undergraduate students seem to do fine using lower order thinking skills such as rules and techniques to find research information, they have difficulty using higher order thinking skills, that “involve interpreting, synthesizing, and creatively manipulating abstract concepts to generate new constructs” (Head and Eisenberg, 2010, p. 37). While teaching faculty encourage more in-depth and critical exploration of subject matter than Google or Wikipedia searches provide, librarians guide students to the peer-reviewed literature to encourage them to do better scholarly work. As educators, librarians’ responsibility to encourage development of higher order thinking skills is articulated in the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. The objectives encourage the use of metacognitive thinking skills in library research, iterating core competencies that information literate students should develop as part of a college education (Information Literacy Competency Standards, 2006).

Students’ Changing Needs

Many libraries, including Whitworth University and Taylor University, have experienced lower reference statistics in recent years. Data shows there has, in fact, been a quantitative decline of reference transactions per week on a per library basis across all institutional types. Students go to the Internet as a first source for self-help information and access electronic library resources remotely from dorm rooms and other study areas rather than coming into the library for basic research needs. Teaching students to be self-sufficient information finders does result in declining numbers of some types of reference queries (Applegate, 2008, p. 181-182). Fewer students may be coming to the reference desk, yet often the questions librarians encounter are less simple and require more complex thinking and searching than Google or general multi-subject databases will satisfy. As students struggle at applying higher order thinking skills to research assignments, librarians guide students in learning to evaluate and interpret scholarly sources in the peer reviewed literature, and synthesize and apply information to generate new constructs. Patrons still need help finding knowledge, authoritative information, unbiased information, and sorting out that information (Anhang and Coffman, 2002, pp. 52-53).

As successive generations grow up using Wikipedia and Google web searches as their everyday sources of information, it is important for educators to teach the value of vetted information (Myerson, 2008, pp. 16,18). Librarians at Whitworth University and Taylor University work deliberately with students in an ongoing effort to disabuse them of the notion that convenience and form is more important than substance. Students want easily accessible information, instantly and online. But information is not enough. Connections must be made that require higher order thinking skills. Students learn to apply higher order thinking skills, such as interpretation and synthesis, and acquire information literacy skills as they grapple with scholarship. Online information is fragmentary, while the usefulness of reference books and peer reviewed literature derives from their organization, connections, context, authoritativeness, and even style (Broccoli, 2008, pp.1-2). Both are necessary in today’s scholarship. Digitization has added value to some reference books essential to library collections, but has not replaced many subject encyclopedias that provide valuable instruction opportunities for librarians to teach students information literacy. While some publishers are beginning to move aggressively...
in offering high quality publications in aggregate collections at reasonable prices, it is likely that publishers and librarians have not moved fast enough with realistic fiscal models to provide vetted more reliable information in digital format.

Online databases do not contain the content of high quality subject encyclopedias in a reference collection. As electronic resources abound reference book usage would drop were it not for the diligent work of reference librarians who connect students with these valuable subject encyclopedias. Some universities have seen usage of subject encyclopedias drop in spite of librarians’ best efforts, while other universities such as Whitworth University continue to see consistent usage as librarians guide students to these sources. “There is often a disconnect between the information sources librarians use and recommend and the information sources researchers and students use” (East, 2010, p. 163). Subject encyclopedias are core to a reference collection, synthesizing and presenting knowledge in a clear, understandable, intelligent manner, readily accessible to undergraduate students. The content of electronic encyclopedias that are available needs to be made more accessible, while print encyclopedias continue to remain core resources of reference collections. Yet online resources remain the most popular with students.

The Millennial generation’s preferred mode of communication is a drastic change from those of previous generations. Their emphasis on mobility and expectation of access to global information 24/7 requires differences in delivery of service to meet their changing needs (Moore and Wells, 2009, pp. 77). We have not yet begun to see the fuller effects of mobilization. Our web sites, databases, e-books, e-journals must be compatible with mobile computing. While some libraries, such as Whitworth University, Taylor University and Palm Beach Atlantic University, weed their reference collection on an ongoing basis to maintain relevancy in a high functioning and well used collection that is well integrated with proprietary databases, other libraries may need more drastic reexamination. Other responses to changing user needs may be reconfiguring space to provide a learning commons. With changing user preferences, how reference is delivered and what makes up the Reference Collection in libraries may require some reexamination.

**Taylor University’s Reference Revitalization**

What is the state of your library’s reference collection? Have you noticed a shift in the number and kind of reference queries? How does your library respond to the transition from print to online reference sources? In a search for a collection that is usable/functional what print resources do you keep and what do you toss? These might be questions considered in the past or for consideration in the near future. Taylor University librarians observed a significant shift in students’ usage patterns, prompting reexamination of the reference collection.

As we looked at our reference collection the overarching assumption is that we are supporting the curriculum and the mission of the university in the best possible way that we can. It means being responsive to student curricular needs but it also means being responsible fiscally by providing resources within our budget that best support what students need. We surveyed our students with a library satisfaction survey (LibQual+) to obtain user feedback. LibQual+ was useful in gaining student perceptions about information resources. We were found wanting. From those surveys we were able to explore what library improvements our constituents (students and faculty) would like to see as well as aspects of library services and resources for which they are satisfied.

One side of the picture was a reference collection that needed an “extreme makeover.” The reference collection hadn’t been seriously weeded in many years. Items had been added but few had been withdrawn. For example: there were 6–8 years of annual almanacs, ancient and dusty volumes of older encyclopedias and out of date directories. We decided to develop
a plan for a complete, item by item, review of the Reference Collection.

First, we began by asking ourselves what were we trying to achieve in our reference collection? What is the purpose of the print collection? What are our assumptions as reference librarians? What are student perceptions? What does “reference” mean to our users in light of electronic access to much of the same information? We examined our reference collection development policy. We had to ask ourselves difficult questions about our favorite tools in light of diminished usage patterns. Our objective was a much tighter, leaner reference collection based on what is used, not on some possible future potential of being used.

We rolled up our sleeves and began the weeding portion of this project with the following steps. First, we reviewed all standing orders and dramatically cut standing orders, many of which had outlived their original purposes or value. Then we went to the collection itself, examining every item or series, and began to deselect based on the following criteria:

• Cost
• Changed frequency from annual to biennial for some titles
• Identified obsolete and unused, duplicated items
• Updated newer editions for some titles
• Eliminated titles inappropriate to our collection, no longer relevant or not supportive of curriculum
• Withdrew bibliographies, subject dictionaries and directories no longer purchased; items older than 1-2 years were withdrawn with a few rare exceptions
• Addressed changes in the curriculum
• Identified and filled gaps
• Pulled some items for repair, removal and relabeling for circulating collection
• Considered online availability or availability of comparable information
• Reviewed reference collection policy statement, revising as we went along

The process involved two reference librarians examining small chunks of the reference collection over a six month period. All librarians could review what had been done. The librarians coordinated with technical services as to workflow and cooperated with all staff in the process. We used standard reference guides when we were unsure. Faculty members were consulted as needed. We allowed no room for sentimentality.

The added benefit to our process was that it opened up dollars for future online reference purchases, especially through cancelled or modified standing orders, and gave us better knowledge of the collection, such as:

• Use, or lack thereof
• Comprehensiveness of the information included
• Relationship of the subject to appropriateness of the curriculum
• Level of readership
• Content duplication of other titles regardless of format
• Condition/age of material
• Timeliness and currency
• Reliability of the information

As we looked to electronic reference sources we examined Credo Reference which included several hundred reference resources. We did not want to duplicate those titles. And we began to look at other online sources that were available. Did we want to purchase directories that are quickly out of date or where the information is easily found online, such as zip code directories? Those were the kinds of resources we discarded. Our justification for doing so was that for most students the Internet is the first line for seeking information. While Taylor University is primarily a residential campus these online reference resources are convenient and available 24/7 and more frequently updated than print sources. With less emphasis to be placed on print sources in the future we looked to the wealth of sources available online. Government documents are an example of this. Information contained in the Washington Information Directory, Congressional Yellow Pages, and other statistical...
sources is available online. In some cases we eliminated the resource entirely, in other cases we went to less frequent standing orders and in other cases we did keep the resource yearly (Statistical Abstracts). We asked ourselves the question, “If the core purpose is to connect users with information, does it really matter that the information is in electronic format as long as it is current, accurate, authoritative, etc.?” In fact, in electronic format the resource is likely to see more use. Some suggestions for a successful weeding project are:

- Plan ahead
- Work in small blocks of time but develop a project timetable
- Use your existing collection development policy
- If it doesn’t fit the curriculum …toss it
- Keep the reference collection current
- Look for high quality reference materials that are free and promote them
- Coordinate bookmarks and cataloging free websites with weeding print titles having comparable information.
- Prepare for more e-books; compare titles with Net Library, ebrary, or other online book system products, especially reference e-book aggregations

These changes are hard. We had to begin to develop new ways of thinking about reference that was foreign to some of the traditional methods. There needs to be a more peaceful coexistence between print and electronic resources. We realized that instruction plays a major role in making students aware of what exists online as well as in print. We realized that we need to make the transition to a digital reference world. We realized that less emphasis will be placed on print sources in the future and we were trying to look to the wealth of sources that are available online.

We know from our experience that students prefer the flexibility of online resources. The tide is shifting to an online world that will only increase. With the advent of Wikipedia and other similar websites, the authority of the “reference resource” has been questioned. Librarians can and should still develop a dynamic and useful reference collection. We have been through similar format questions from print to microform to digital. So this problem isn’t a new one. Librarians need to be wise consumers and careful teachers to guide students learning scholarly research.

A Learning Commons

As with most projects there is another side of the picture. We were looking to free up some real estate with an eye for an information commons area. “With a Learning Commons, library gate counts soar as students flock to use computers and one-stop services and to see and be seen by their friends while they collaborate in an environment in which the social and academic are merged” (Moore and Wells, 2009, p. 75). Weeding the reference collection in conjunction with shifting the circulating collection was one small part of planning for an information commons area. This information commons area enables students to have more collaborative learning space, more computer access in an atmosphere of comfortable seating, good lighting, places where students could work together. Over the past few years we have seen, as many of you have seen, a need for more collaborative workspace in the library. Many students see the library as their “living room” or “den.” The library has become a place for community, for socializing and for studying.

Libraries and learning commons are examples of third places both traditionally and virtually. Third places, places apart from home and work/school where people hang out, are necessary for a sense of community. “They are distinctive informal gathering places where people feel at home. Third places nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact by helping to create a ‘sense of place’ and community” (Lawson, 2004, p. 125). Communal gathering spaces such as churches and libraries are also where values are shaped and moral habits developed. For Christians, education shapes minds, but also hearts and souls (Diekema and Caddell, 2001, pp. 182, 184).

Education involves much more than the simple, efficient transfer of information.
The cultivation of hard-earned higher order thinking skills necessary for analysis and synthesis of information are the hallmark of a good education. Face-to-face interactive contact between students and with faculty and librarians cultivate the life of the mind and the ethos of hard work. (Diekema and Caddell, 2001, pp. 171,175-176). Libraries have historically been centers of intellectual, cultural, and even social life, and learning commons serve the same purposes both in terms of traditional and virtual ambience.

Students seek information, but they also want a sense of community. They are interested in meaningful communities. The most meaningful communities for students are not virtual communities, rather they are communities that exist both online and in the communities in which they live (Lawson, 2004, p. 128). Dynamic learning commons can fulfill both needs by deliberate design of spaces to provide quiet spaces as well as collaborative spaces, various one-stop services such as writing centers and technology assistance, and frequent staff presence to provide opportunities for librarians and technology support staff to support users while they are researching. A survey from the UMass Amherst Learning Commons clearly shows students still need and expect face-to-face assistance from experts. They have high expectations for library and technology services. The librarian’s role is important because they value expert assistance to navigate complex information seeking (Moore and Wells, 2009, p. 84). Students want assistance at their point of need and this study concludes that librarians need to move out from behind the reference desk to connect with students effectively.

The question is worth asking ourselves: how does the reference collection relate to reference services?

**Palm Beach Atlantic’s Perspective on Roving Reference**

It would be utter foolishness to imply that every library that is not practicing roving reference is guilty of slavishly following tradition and “that’s the way we’ve always done it” mentality. However, we would do well to every now and then ask ourselves whether we are in fact doing library services simply out of habit and custom, or if there might be a better plan or procedure to consider.

The truth of the matter is that roving reference isn’t necessarily suited for every library. There are obviously a number of considerations that enter into the equation. Learning Resources Consultants (Reference Librarians) at Palm Beach Atlantic University have had the experience in the new Warren Library of doing roving since early 2007. The literature on roving reference provides additional insight.

Anyone doing a literature review on roving reference will invariably encounter a number of writers who allude to an article published in *RQ* in 1972 entitled, “Why Don’t They Ask Questions?” written by Swope and Katzer. Even then a number of important questions were being asked concerning reference services. In a study at Syracuse University’s Carnegie Library they found that 65% of those who had questions would not ask a librarian (Swope and Katzer, 1972, p. 163). Three major reasons surfaced including dissatisfaction with the past service of a librarian. The second identified reason was because students felt the question was too simple and the third was that they didn’t want to bother the librarian. According to the authors, “Obviously, a message has gotten through to a large group of potential users. It isn’t the message the librarian wants to communicate, but through words or actions librarians are reinforcing the user’s feelings that he is either a bother or he is stupid” (Swope and Katzer, 1972, p. 164). Among the conclusions of that study was that perhaps the worst barrier was the reference desk and that it was imperative for the library staff to circulate among the users. They recognized that a librarian cannot afford to be chained to a reference desk and that there was a need to change the image of the preoccupied librarian (Swope and Katzer, 1972, p. 165).

Evidently the situation has not changed dramatically in the years from 1972 through 2010.
Based on a case study done at the University of Rochester and reported in “Studying Students,” 79% of students when asked “Did you think of talking with a librarian?” indicated that they had not talked to the librarian (Burns and Harper, 2007, p. 10).

So where did the practice of roving reference originate? Some have suggested that reference roving probably has been around in some form or another since the beginning of reference service. Every reference librarian has had occasion to get up from a reference desk and move around and in the process ended up helping a library patron. The concept of reference roving very closely parallels the business concept of Management by Wandering Around (MBWA). This was developed by executives at Hewlett-Packard in the 1970s and was described as “the business of staying in touch with the territory all the time” and by “being accessible and approachable” (Lorenzen, 1997, p. 52).

The PBA library staff does not have an abundance of comparative reference statistics since from day one in our Warren Library we initiated roving reference. We had a reference help desk in the old library facility but we have never had one at all in the new facility. So the bottom line is that we cannot say with authority that we have objective statistical data to prove that our reference transaction count has increased simply because of the fact that we now do roving reference. However, our hunch is that the number of reference transactions has increased not only because of the new facility but also because of roving. A description of our roving reference experience at PBA follows by answering some frequently asked questions.

### How do you know just whom to approach?

This is an important question. Barbara Pitney in her article says that “experienced rovers develop their own sixth sense about identifying patrons to approach” (Pitney and Slote, 2007, p. 57). A good bit of it is simply common sense. Common sense compels us to go up to the student gazing closely at the Library of Congress classification scheme hanging on the wall. Common sense also tells us to keep walking past the student typing attentively on a Word document in the Information Commons area. However, there is a broad murky area in between. One rule of thumb is if someone is wandering around and looks the least bit bewildered I approach them. Also if they look up from their work and we make eye contact we will say “Hi.” My experience has been that I initiated most transactions although there are times when patrons flag me down.

### How do you approach a patron and what do you say to them when you approach them?

First of all, and most importantly, smile and be friendly. I will often ask, “Are you finding everything that you need?” or one of its many variations such as, “Can I help you with anything?” or “How is your search going?” or “I am the roving librarian on duty right now. Is there anything I can help you with?” Reference roving encourages librarians to be more personable. Some rovers will often shake hands when they greet a patron and will introduce themselves and ask their names. Our goal is to build helping relationships with students. As reference rovers we strive to have a genuine servant’s heart and not be condescending.

There are three floors in the Warren Library at PBA. When I am on duty I always plan to rove the two upper floors at least once each hour. Whenever I see someone in the stacks I will invariably ask them if they are finding everything that they need. My experience has been that at least a third of the time they will accept my offer of assistance. Many times their
The initial reaction will be that they are fine but then after a second or two they will often say something like “well on second thought, yes, I could use some help.” So their initial response is not always their final response.

Some of the things we try to avoid include looking at student’s screens so they don’t feel that they are being spied upon. We endeavor to be sensitive about invading a patron’s personal space. There have been virtually no instances of students being rude to us or taking offense by our asking them if they need assistance.

**How can we stay out on the floor, make ourselves available, and feel useful?**

Some of the other activities we do include pushing in chairs, picking up trash, pushing in book ends, and checking to see that computers are logged out. None of the roving librarians is actually standing or moving around for the entire shift. Even though there is not a reference help desk, in essence the reference librarian makes one when he/she sits down at a designated computer in the Information Commons area during slow times. We have a large colorful, eye catching sign which says, “Got Questions?” and “We are here to help!” This sign is on a tall stand at the computer we use if and when we sit down. On the same table is another reserved computer which is used in helping patrons.

**How do people in general find you when they want you?**

There is a small flip sign at the service desk to indicate which Learning Resources Consultant is on duty and the sign includes his or her phone number. Each rover has a portable phone so that he or she can be reached at all times. It is not uncommon for someone at the service desk to call the rover on duty while that person is roving upstairs to alert them that he/she is needed on the main floor to answer a reference question.

**What is our overall evaluation of the roving reference experience?**

To characterize it as a smashing success would be a bit of a stretch. However, the librarians are agreed that overall the experience has been successful and that it has met our original expectations. There is no doubt that we have reached students that we would not have reached otherwise.

There have been obvious advantages. Roving has allowed us to be more visible and more proactive in seeking out people who are in need of assistance. We are more aware of what’s happening in the building and can monitor things like noise levels and equipment problems. We often notice guests who come in and greet them. Roving helps us to be more flexible and perform a variety of duties, as needed. Roving also eliminates the barrier of the desk. Patrons are taught at the point of use.

Roving reference is a relatively new service model for many libraries but it provides unique opportunities to encounter students. Spontaneous user contact where we engage our patrons at their point of need multiplies our chances of contributing positively to the lives of students in the overall teaching/learning process. After all, isn’t that our calling as information service professionals?

There are numerous examples in the library literature of successes and failures at roving reference. A number of public libraries have had a good measure of success with roving notably the King County Library System in Seattle, Washington. Utica College in Utica, N.Y. has also been quite successful with roving reference. Obviously, there are a number of considerations and ways at looking at providing quality reference service. However, it is the overall view of the Learning Resources Consultants at PBA that the advantages of roving definitely outweigh any disadvantages.

**Reference Desks are not Passé**

Not everyone agrees that roving reference is such a great idea. Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton experimented with it for only two months during the summer of 2005 and gave it up. The very brief amount of time spent at it and the time of year may well have been contributing factors. Whitworth University has not adopted roving reference nor eliminated its reference desk. The reference desk is staged

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at different heights allowing students to sit down with a reference librarian to work at the desk, or to stand where a librarian may spread out materials such as maps or atlases. The desk is open at both ends so movement in and out is easy and librarians jump up to go over to students working on computers, in the reference stacks or needing help locating items in the circulating stacks. The community atmosphere of the university is such that librarians chat with and interact with students passing by all the time, so they approach one another naturally and often. Other students see librarians in conversation with students and realize librarians are approachable. It also helps that faculty routinely send students to librarians and encourage them to consult with librarians on their assigned research.

The reference desk can still serve as a main focus point where reference librarians meet and greet the daily. “By constantly offering services to patrons, even if no formal reference interview is occurring, the library will gain a reputation for being friendly and helpful” (Andeen, 2001, p. 285). Accessing information is not enough. When students know where to find librarians, ready access to service, on-demand research help, and a welcoming face greets them. The opportunity of a teachable moment occurs. That goes a long way toward ensuring patrons the highest level of service. At UMass Amherst Learning Commons, “the library entrant survey of 3/14/06 showed that library entrants overwhelmingly preferred to go to the desk for reference interactions. Face-to-face reference interactions were strongly preferred” (Fitzpatrick, Moore, and Lang, 2008, p. 235). In our increasingly online and impersonal society, reference desks still have an important place in libraries and learning commons.

**Conclusion**

We’ve seen that focusing on serving students and teaching them to be competent researchers is still the priority for librarians. Revitalizing the reference collection may be needed in some libraries so that relevance and accessibility to scholarly information remain highly achievable. Roving reference or moving out from behind the reference desk to reach students at their point of need are being used to good effect in some libraries. There is not a single solution for all libraries and that remains the challenge for each library. The reference desk is not passé. Neither are print reference sources. Technology and electronic resources may be preferred by users but are not enough in and of themselves for students to use in learning higher level thinking skills and information literacy skills. As has been seen in previous decades, as more types of capability become available, patrons want to use all types. Reference librarians continue to teach multiple formats and continue to be creative in how to reach students whether in libraries or learning commons. ☞

**REFERENCES**


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