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Faith and Learning in the Reference Interview

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ABSTRACT

The reference interview provides a number of opportunities for Christian librarians to model the integration of faith and learning. When conducting reference interviews, librarians may have the chance to: 1) show a willingness to go the extra mile, 2) provide users with tools for seeking information successfully, 3) discuss information ethics, 4) exhibit openness to different points of view, and 5) demonstrate commitment to seeing individuals as God does. Ultimately, the reference interview can be a means to demonstrate that the life of the mind and the life of the spirit can (and should) be inextricably intertwined for a Christian scholar.

Introduction

The integration of spiritual and intellectual education is one of the primary goals of faith-based institutions of higher education (Riley, 2005, p. 262). While discussions of this issue are usually tied to the classroom, I'd like to focus on how librarians can use the reference interview to encourage students to consider the relationship between faith and learning. The reference interview is formally defined as "a conversation between a member of the library reference staff and a library user for the purpose of clarifying the user's needs and aiding the user in meeting those needs" (Sutton & Holt, 1995, p. 36). More informally, the reference interview is where librarians talk to users and try to find out what information they really need, as opposed to what they think they need, so that we can help them find it. In his seminal article, "Question-negotiation and information seeking in libraries," Taylor (1968) describes the reference interview as "a very subtle problem – how one person tries to find out what another person wants to know, when the latter cannot describe his need precisely" (p. 179).

A reference interview can be as simple as a quick request for directions or as complex as an ongoing collaboration on a research project, and may be affected by a number of factors, including "the personal communication styles of the participants in the reference interview, the needs or expectations of the user, the collection available for use, and the policies and procedures of the institution" (Sutton & Holt, 1995, p. 36). For a reference interview to be successful, the librarian often needs to discover the extent of the user's knowledge about the topic, the reason for the request, and the amount of time the user has available to answer the question (in my experience, the amount of time is frequently inadequate). Sutton and Holt (1995) state that a reference interview is comprised of the following steps: 1) question negotiation, 2) location of the necessary information or, at the least, progress towards

solving the problem, and 3) communication of the information to the student or, in some cases, referral to another source of information (p. 37). As I go through the various steps of the reference interview, I try to incorporate a number of factors that I hope lead students to consider the integration of faith and learning. These factors include: 1) a willingness to go the extra mile to find the resources necessary, 2) an effort to educate students so that the next time they will be able to find the information themselves, 3) a discussion of the ethics involved in using information (e.g., plagiarism, proper citation, etc.), 4) an openness to different points of view, and 5) a commitment to see students as God does, that is, as valuable human beings who deserve my complete attention and full effort.

Going the Extra Mile

Fortunately, the first element complements the culture of librarianship, which emphasizes service as one of the primary responsibilities of librarians. Future librarians are socialized in graduate school to offer prompt, efficient, and cheerful service to their patrons, which is more successful for some librarians than with others. In fact, the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* created by the Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association (2004) state that reference librarians should demonstrate approachability, interest, attentive listening, effective searching, and follow-up. Sutton and Holt (1995) emphasize that

although communication skills are necessary to an efficient and productive reference interview, it is important that the librarian have a genuinely helpful attitude and a basic commitment to individual growth and pursuit of knowledge. This is not a matter of interview style but a firm, underlying philosophy that leads to effective service delivery, rather than just the appearance of such. (p. 39)

In practice, this willingness to go the extra mile translates to my doing all in my power to help students find the information they need. After all, one of my responsibilities as both a Christian and a librarian is to provide students with the assistance they need, even if I have to skip my lunch break or stay later than I usually do. Frequently, I can find the information fairly quickly, but sometimes the search requires considerable time and effort. On occasion, I have had reference interviews that lasted for several weeks because students returned again and again as their topics evolved or they became aware of additional project requirements. Depending on the student's information need, I may search the library's holdings and databases, browse through the works in the reference section, search the World Wide Web, or do all of the above. In one case, I worked with a young man who needed a variety of definitions for a paper he was writing on the word "hegemony." My initial search produced a few definitions, but he needed more than what I had found. After striking out in all of the online sources available to our library, I finally resorted to browsing the reference section and examining any reference work that looked like it might have a definition of the word. Despite the occasional difficulty, however, I have rarely had to give up on a reference question, although in some cases it did take me several days to find the information needed.

Sometimes going the second mile in the reference interview can be as simple as taking time to sit down and spend time with the students in order to understand what they are really looking for. The student who comes in and asks "Where are your psychology journals?" may actually be looking for a refereed journal article on depression among Hispanic immigrants, but I have no way of knowing that unless I ask for more information. If I answered that question by simply describing the location of the psychology journals, I wouldn't be doing my job. Dewdney and Ross (1994) list a number of effective reference librarian behaviors that improve patron satisfaction, one of which is to avoid taking the user's initial question at face value. In fact, sometimes the

process of clarifying their information needs for me helps students to define their topics for themselves as well as for me. Regardless of what form it takes, however, a willingness to go above and beyond what is required to help a student find information offers a way to model the integration of faith and learning: while my education and experience may provide me with the knowledge of where to seek the necessary information, it is my faith that compels me to add the dimension of dedicated service.

Educating Students

A second aspect of the reference interview that can encourage the integration of faith and learning involves educating students about the information seeking process. Wilson (1995) suggests that "reference service is the most intimate form of instruction," and that, "in some instances, the one-to-one assistance a user receives from the librarian may be the most effective form of instruction" (p. 158). Sutton & Holt (1995) recommend that

when interviewing a user, the reference librarian should assess whether the person needs instruction in using the library or specific reference tools, [and] ... should be ready to incorporate instruction in the use of the library's catalog and other reference tools into the interview. (p. 48)

While my first priority is to locate the information needed, I also make an effort to provide users with the tools that will allow them to seek and process information successfully in the future. My goal is to help students to become information literate, to be able to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 1989, para. 3). In the words of the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989),

information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how information is organized, how to find information, and how to use

My goal is to help students to become information literate.

The library has a responsibility to provide access to information representing all points of view so that students can survey the evidence and decide for themselves.

information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for life-long learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand. (para. 3)

By explaining what I'm doing and by including students in the search process, I can help students to learn various research techniques. While I hesitate to compare information to fish, the adage "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" (Tripp, 1987, p. 646) certainly applies in this situation. Even though many of the students I work with are very computer literate and technologically skilled, I find that they are not necessarily "sophisticated in navigating their way through the maze of computer interfaces," selecting appropriate reference materials, or managing information overload (Curry, 2005, para. 25). As students and I work through the process of satisfying their information needs, I often have the opportunity to demonstrate skills such as searching the library catalog, locating a book by using its call number, or searching the library's online databases. Where possible, I try to involve the students in the search process by letting them type in searches, locate books on the shelf, etc.

If applicable, I may talk about the different resources offered by the library and why some of the resources may be more useful for the student's information need than others. Such discussions frequently lead to an explanation of the many facets of the library or how to effectively search the databases. Recently, a student asked for help in looking for information on a certain topic. She had used a number of search terms in a number of different databases, but had been unable to locate any articles or other information. I was able to show her how to find articles on her topic by using different terms and by using truncation. She was very pleased with the results, and left the reference interview not only with the information she wanted but also with the knowledge of how to conduct similar searches in the future. Of course, at times my efforts to educate students

are less effective, but that doesn't change the fact that one of my responsibilities as a librarian is to help provide students with the "specialized knowledge [and] research methodologies that enable competent living in modern society" (Oklahoma Christian University, 2007, para. 2).

Ethics of Information Use

The third factor of the reference interview that can lead students to consider the integration of faith and learning is an emphasis on the ethics of information use. One of the most frequent questions I get at the reference desk is "How do I cite this?" Students are frequently confused about how to refer to and quote sources, and, as a result, I spend a lot of time helping students cite sources appropriately. Sources in electronic form are particularly difficult for students, and sometimes the rest of us, to cite correctly, in part because style manuals do not always cover the vast array of sources available on the Internet. Frequently, as I work with students on the mechanics of citing sources, we discuss the issue of plagiarism, and I try to help them to understand why avoiding plagiarism is so important. Such conversations may touch on the need to use quotation marks appropriately or to rephrase a sentence in order to avoid the unethical use of information. Through these discussions, I attempt to convey to students that, while finding reliable information may be crucial to academic success, the ethical use of that information is crucial to spiritual success.

Researching Controversy

A fourth element of the reference interview that is related to the integration of faith and learning concerns the ways in which I help students research controversial or sensitive topics. Hughes (2001) states that the life of the mind demands: 1) commitment to search for truth, 2) openness to perspectives and worldviews different from our own, 3) critical thinking, analysis, and assessment, and 4) intellectual creativity (pp. 2-4). Similarly, Smith (2006) coined the term "spiritual literacy" to describe "the ability to identify, decode,

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analyze, and critically evaluate information ... from divergent religious points of view” (p. 32). In my experience, students frequently approach the reference desk looking only for information that supports their opinions or points of view. I feel strongly that one of my responsibilities is to encourage students to consider all points of view on any given topic, particularly topics that may be controversial in nature. Several months ago, a student approached the reference desk and said “This library doesn’t have anything on gay marriage, right?” because he assumed, as he later told me, that a library at a Christian university would not provide access to such materials. I assured him that I could find that kind of information for him and went on to find articles and other sources that argued both for and against gay marriage. As he looked through the search results, he asked me why we would purchase such materials and my response was that the library has a responsibility to provide access to information representing all points of view so that students can survey the evidence and decide for themselves. Since this answer didn’t seem to satisfy him, I also mentioned that it is extremely difficult to argue against a point of view if you don’t know anything about it, an argument that seemed to make sense to him. Through exchanges like these, I hope to demonstrate to students that faith does not limit intellectual inquiry, but rather calls us to seek truth through experiencing and evaluating different perspectives. As Fine (1995) states, “it is human nature to defend what we know; it is an act of intellectual discipline and emotional courage to have an ‘open mind’ ” (p. 18).

God's Vision

Perhaps the most important factor of the reference interview that can promote the integration of faith and learning is a firm commitment to see each user as God’s creation. The ultimate goal is for me to see students as God sees them, as individuals who deserve my full attention and sincere effort, particularly in the context of the reference interview. In fact, the library literature recommends that reference librarians deal with each user as an individual

and that “interviewing and search strategies ... be tailored to the user’s circumstances” (Sutton & Holt, 1995, p. 38). Radcliff (1995) suggests that librarians consider the following factors related to users in order to have a successful reference interview: 1) characteristics such as age, gender, communication apprehension, etc.; 2) communication behavior, style and function; 3) satisfaction; 4) compliance, and 5) relational history (pp. 503–504). After all,

reference is not just about resources. It is about users, whether they are students or scholars, browsers or borrowers, novices or seasoned researchers, whether they present themselves as purposeful or vague, secure or timid, cool or agitated, hopeful or discouraged, competent or inept - or somewhere in between. (Fine, 1995, p. 17)

If I can see each student who asks me for help as unique, I find that I am better able to focus entirely on that person and thus avoid being distracted by email, phone calls, or even other students.

This goal is frequently a challenge for me, since I often feel pulled in multiple directions by competing responsibilities that make it difficult to give one person my complete attention. For example, when I was at the reference desk working on this essay I was approached in quick succession by three different students who needed help. While two of the students were waiting for me to finish helping the first, I received a phone call about a fourth student who needed assistance. I was able to help all four individuals, but I’m not sure that the first one or two received my complete attention. Other barriers to overcome sometimes come from the students themselves: for example, when I work with students who expect me to compensate for the lack of work they have done, I find that seeing them from God’s perspective can be challenging. Nonetheless, every workday presents me with fresh opportunities to practice this skill, and I continue to press on toward the goal of seeing each student through God’s eyes rather than my own.

Conclusion

Despite the various challenges involved, the reference interview offers me the opportunity to model the integration of faith and learning by 1) demonstrating a willingness to go the extra mile, 2) providing users with tools for seeking information successfully, 3) discussing the ethical use of information, 4) providing balanced coverage of any given topic, and 5) viewing students as God does. As both a Christian and a librarian, I hope to provide information that is enriched by service, much as learning is enriched by faith. Although my education and training have provided me with the tools to help students find the information they need, my faith is the factor that enables me to offer the level of service that Christ calls for. As I struggle daily to do both, I hope that students see an individual who demonstrates her belief that faith and learning are both integral to Christian higher education, despite the fact that “our current social condition – the maelstrom of modernity – makes it incredibly difficult for Christian students to form a life that integrally connects their personal and public worlds” (Garber, 1996, p. 88). In the end, my prayer is that I may use the reference interview to help students to see that the life of the mind and the life of the spirit are more than merely compatible – that they can (and should) be inextricably intertwined in the life of a Christian scholar. ✝

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