Reference Desk and Beyond

Introduction

Academic Libraries have reference librarians who serve students, faculty and staff who present a variety of research questions. Traditionally, this service has been delivered through one-on-one interaction with patrons at the library. However, with the advent of advanced technology, more individuals are using library services at a distance. Today's challenge for a reference librarian is to deliver a personal touch in an electronic environment. A reference librarian in the 21st century should offer a blended service of virtual and physical face-to-face interactions.

Physical Face-to-Face-Reference

Many of us have students who come to the reference desk with questions such as the following: "I need a book on US History, can you point me to that section in the library?" or "I need help finding articles for my paper on bio fuels." Physical face-to-face reference lends itself to a personal, immediate interaction with the patron. This allows us to see body language and to work with the physical material which enhances communication. For example, if a student comes to me with an actual homework assignment, I can guide them to the right information easier. Misunderstandings are cleared up quickly; whereas in the virtual world body language nuances get lost. Coffman (2003) supports this idea by saying, "At the regular reference desk, the librarian and the patron often work together to find the information the patron is looking for " (p. 11). However, the library is not physically accessible to all students.

Virtual Reference

More students are studying at a distance. This poses a problem when it comes to reference help for two major reasons. First, there are limitations to the current technology. Video chat is not yet at a place where all distortions have been eliminated. Infrastructure, such as fast link cables are not available to internet users, although they might be available to intranet users. There is also some speed and quality deterioration over wireless.

The second reason is that every student might not have the best technology that is available. Some students cannot afford the fastest internet speed. Some might have slow computers and others have poor video capabilities. Johnson and Alexander (2008) note that "Across the country, libraries are creating new services to better meet changing campus needs. Reference departments provide virtual reference and engage faculty and students via online chat and other tools" (p. 25). This of course, depends on the right infrastructure. Libraries have tackled this problem with a variety of solutions. Most libraries provide emails specifically used for reference questions. Others will take

questions via the phone. Libraries are also including chat widgets on their website that will allow patrons to chat with a librarian. A few libraries, such as Northern Maine Community College Library, use Skype as an option to provide reference and other help to patrons. All of these approaches are presently stop gap measures used to bring the physical world to a virtual world. However, the virtual world has not reached the sophistication such that it can replace the physical world. The present situation seems to call for a blended service of virtual and physical face-to-face interactions.

Opinions

In order to find out if other people agree with me regarding the advantages to one-on-one interaction at the reference desk; and, to find out if people would agree that there should be a blended service of virtual and face-to-face interactions, I posed the following questions to fellow Librarians on Facebook: What do you think are the advantages of one-on-one interaction at the reference desk? And, can you have those same advantages if you do reference virtually? Both librarians and non-librarians (students) responded. The quotes in the following sections represent the responses from both parties.

Responses on Face-to-Face Reference

"One on one can allow you to read the body language of the student. Many times I figure out by their posture, or facial expressions that they may not be voicing exactly what they need. It also allows me the chance to sit them down and watch them do a search, and it often allows them to do a search and come right back if something doesn't work." – Nikki Rech, Outreach Librarian, Savannah State University

"You didn't ask me, but I like reference librarians to be there when I'm wandering around. Or, I can go up to them and describe a biochemistry book that is, "like blue, with a swirly thing on it" and then they disappear and come back with what I'm looking for like MAGIC. I guess you could do it virtually, but I find a physical person sitting in the location I expect to be comforting. Oh yeah, one time one of the librarians helped me make a poster for a conference. Then, she cleaned it up and did of this alignment stuff to make it look perfect. I'm a big fan of the librarians. They know things." – Shayna Bailey, Med School Student – George Washington University School of Medicine

"I usually only seek out the assistance of a reference librarian when I'm thoroughly lost and have investigated all of our library's online resources on my own. By this point, I've often lost confidence and may be feeling confused about what I'm even looking for. In that scenario, in-person exchanges are more helpful. This is in the context of a law school library." – Suzanne Sutherland, Law Student – Wayne State University Law School

"I believe face to face interactions are superior. Mostly for the reasons that Nikki already stated. You can see if the student is getting it, or if they are flustered by their reactions and body language and you can adjust your answers or suggestions accordingly. You can guide them through the search process and point out things on the screen and see that they are getting it and it's much quicker to point to something on the screen than it is to type out something like "on the left hand side of the screen about 1/2 way down the page you will notice a filter for suggested subject terms" and then find out they are a on a laptop and they need to scroll down and then that takes like 5 minutes to figure out in chat.

In addition it's also nice to have some sort of confirmation that they student/patron is satisfied and has understood the concept you have been trying to explain. Sometimes in virtual reference the person just logs off chat or just stops emailing. And you don't know if they are frustrated that it didn't work so they logged off, or if they found your answer so so simple and thorough that they fully grasped it and didn't need any further assistance." – Dana Ouellette, Information Services Librarian, Concordia University College of Alberta

 "The advantage of face-to-face interaction is that sometimes verbal communication is faster. If someone is not grasping your explanation, you can tell by their body language. And vice versa, it can be easier for the patron to tell you (the librarian) that you aren't understanding the question. On the other hand, chat has been very effective for us, so I'm not sure that there is a significant difference. Particularly when the patron is known to us and we can work from a known starting base. We use a free service (Zoho) which patrons use as guests. So it is their choice to identify themselves." – Anonymous Librarian

"I sometimes have to say to people, "Show me what you're trying to do." Then I can grasp what they need. Can virtual reference do that?" – Lauren Matacio, Instructional Librarian, Andrews University

 "I believe that one of the major advantages of having face-to-face interaction is the personal factor. Sometimes, the interaction itself is more important than the information required. There are times when a person comes to the desk and what they really need is to make a connection with another human being, to share a bit of themselves, to receive a word/nod of encouragement, to know that someone will listen to them and help them without passing judgment. Once that connection has been made, you can continue to foster the relationship away from the reference desk...a smile as you pass each other on campus, a hello when you run into each other in town... They may never come back to the desk or they might just come back repeatedly, they might just bring a friend or two, and they might just become the library's best advocate." – Andra Aaby, MLIS, ILL Technician, Walla Walla University

Responses on Virtual Reference

"Can you do this virtually? Some of it. Also would depend on the program you are using. Pure chat takes out any hope of reading facial expressions and other body language, but another form might put that back in to the picture." – Nikki Rech, Outreach Librarian, Savannah State University

"Also, I've had classmates give me research advice via chat, but I think it works because of the established relationship, which is a product of many face to face interactions. This is in the context of a law school library." – Suzanne Sutherland, Law Student – Wayne State University Law School

"In my opinion there are 2 main advantages of virtual reference: 1) it allows for quick answers of basic questions that people have while studying/writing/researching at home so they don't have to come into the library and 2) for people who are very shy to be able to get help anonymously (while this sounds silly I think we all know it's true there are people on the computers right in front of the desk using chat because they are too shy to approach the desk). – Dana Ouellette, Information Services Librarian, Concordia University College of Alberta

Francoeur (2008) supports Ouellette's idea that one advantage of virtual reference would be to give a way for those who are shy to ask a question anonymously. He states, "Many librarians recognize that by offering IM as a reference communication channel, they are providing students with an interface that is familiar and may reduce the anxiety that some students feel about asking a question." (Francoeur , 2008, p. 71)

Responses on Blended Reference

"In my opinion, virtual reference and face-to-face reference are two sides of the same coin: providing quality reference service to patrons. Nor can you forget other ways to provide it, like phone, email, or text. That doesn't mean each service is interchangeable, though. Face-to-face lets you see facial expressions and read tone of voice. It also means you can go more in-depth, demonstrate databases, and guide the patron if they're asking for the wrong thing. Phone allows you to do some of these same things, but also lets you help someone who can't (or won't) come to the library. Text and email excel in giving quick responses, allowing tentative patrons to still ask for help, and supporting library users who are most accustomed to researching from home. To me, the more ways you can offer assistance the better."– Deborah Schander, Reference/Student Services Librarian, Georgia State University College of Law

"I absolutely believe that virtual reference can be as dynamic as face-to-face. I have used it in my own studies because I happen to be very far from the university where I am studying. The program used for chat makes a huge difference, though. If you have a program that keeps record of the consultation along with the librarian's and the patron's contact information, you and the user can go back afterwards and reread it and maybe initiate a follow up. I found having a transcript of the chat session sent to me right afterwards to be extremely helpful. I also believe that we waste a lot of face-to-face reference queries where a bit of preparation time would have made the consult so much more rich. Chat allows for that, as well. I doubt there is a librarian out there who hasn't had the experience of thinking of just the right resources 5 minutes after the face-to-face encounter ends. I know that if I have a chance to get the query and think about it, my answer will be more targeted and nuanced than if a student just walks up to the desk…unless of course it is a for a question I have answered hundreds of times… in which case I'm not sure that all the body language in the world makes a bit of difference to my answer. I honestly wonder why we are still using ready-reference techniques of bygone years and staffing the desk for hours on end in order to catch that student who walks up needing help. Why don't we offer chat + appointments. In those cases, it is easy to follow up with a face-to-face if that seems the most appropriate (and sometimes it is when you really have to tease out what the student is looking for). But it allows us to be at the top of our game and also helps the student plan." at the top of our game and also helps the student plan." – Anonymous Librarian

"I don't think virtual reference can fully replace in person reference; some reference questions can only be answered in person. For instance showing someone where to find something in the stacks, demonstrating how to do research online, etc. I think that virtually a librarian can tell the user what search terms to use in their searches, and what resources would be most helpful but it's a lot harder to demonstrate how to search, and the various features of different databases and other online resources. I used virtual reference just as often as in person reference if not more as a graduate student and I got a lot of personalized help and resources. However, whenever the librarian had their attention diverted for a moment or was finding materials for me I never knew how long it would take for them to return. In person it's easier to see what is happening and see what the librarian is doing and therefore less frustrating. I wouldn't want to get rid of either type of reference or even assume one replaces the other. I think they complement each other and offer different benefits. Virtual reference is very useful when you've gone home and want help outside the library, or even as a second resource if all the in-person librarians are helping other students." – Anonymous Librarian

"There are basically three things librarians do: find things, solve problems and remove barriers. That can be done virtually as well as in person. It is sometimes easier for me to work face-to-face, because it takes very careful wording to be succinct but yet explain fully." – Marge Seifert, Public Services Librarian, Southern Adventist University

Conclusion

The issues raised in this paper were reflected in the responses of both librarians and non-librarians. Libraries provide services to a diverse group of students who use the library physically and virtually. From the comments and discussion it seems unlikely that a total move to a virtual environment will meet the needs of our patrons. Therefore librarians should provide reference services in both the physical and virtual realms.

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