

Short Paper #3 – Observation of Interpersonal Communication at the Reference Desk

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## **Introduction**

One of the most frustrating experiences a library user may have is an unsuccessful trip to the reference desk. Many aspects of the reference interaction can cause such an unsuccessful experience: the user receives a “wrong” answer, whatever that constitutes in the user’s mind; the librarian feels too busy to devote the proper time to the question; one or both parties gets signals from the other that negatively impact the interaction, such as a user’s impatience or pre-existing frustration at having to ask for help or a librarian’s lack of understanding or approachability. These are but a few of the scenarios that could ultimately lead to an unsatisfied user. Looking at the number of ways reference interactions can go sour, it is a wonder that they tend to go smoothly as often as they do—according to some of the literature, this can range from 55% of the time to 69% of the time (Ross & Dewdney, 1998).

Fortunately for users, libraries know their role in the community is one of service and, as such, they generally aim to serve their users as successfully as possible. To this end, it is crucial for those engaged in reference services to continually evaluate the quality of the services they provide. The purpose of this study is take an evaluative look at a library’s reference services, specifically at the manner in which they handle reference interactions. Via unobtrusive observation, one may clearly be able to tell how aware librarians are of their verbal and non-verbal communication, both of which are key elements of a successful reference interaction and, thus, the satisfaction level of the users.

In addition to regular evaluation of reference services, libraries may ensure quality control by following established guidelines or “best practices” for reference service, such

as those outlined by American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA, 2004). RUSA has divided its guidelines into five main areas which also serve as the organization for this study: approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow-up.

The site chosen for this study is a medium-sized public library ("MSPL") serving a municipality of considerable size in New Jersey. The observations were taken during a two-hour period on a weekday afternoon in early winter, a time when traffic is regrettably rather light. Since there is little in the way of adequate seating near the reference desk, the observer spoke with the reference librarians about the research noting that he would be sitting a bit closer than an ordinary user, in a location where he could see and hear relevant communication at the reference desk. The reference librarians were fortunately agreeable to this, for which they were thanked profusely. Mere minutes after observation had begun, the original librarian's ("L1") shift ended, so much of the observations were of the librarian with the later shift ("L2"). As appearance and dress may have an effect upon the non-verbal dynamic, L1 and L2 are described: L1 is a pleasant-looking woman in her early 30s with long brown hair tied back in a neat ponytail, dressed in a plain but well-fitting sweater and dark turtleneck; L2 is an older woman with short white hair, dressed in a white cardigan sweater, wearing modest, holiday-themed earrings.

### **Approachability**

One can hardly miss the reference desk immediately upon entering the MSPL building; it is directly ahead of the entrance, and its location seems to have been designed as a central point. A large sign hovering above the reference desk, a floating structure

particularly close to the banks of Internet service and OPAC access computers, with high-contrast, sizable script clearly says “INFORMATION” above the word “REFERENCE.” The default state of both L1 and L2 seemed to be a seated position in front of a computer terminal, facing off to the side of what was considered by most users the “front” of the reference desk. It is noted again that traffic was light during the period of observation, and it is possible that L1 and L2 orient themselves otherwise when more users are about. Generally, though, it is not good practice for librarians to appear entranced by the warm glow of cathode ray tubes especially if they are doing so while facing any direction other than front. Such a position could indicate a lack of approachability to users, a powerful form of non-verbal communication. Whether this configuration actually results in disgruntled users at MSPL is unknown and is beyond the scope of this study.

Despite the questionable default configuration of L1 and L2, they seemed always at the ready to address users in proximity to the reference desk. L2 also tended to stand up frequently when users were about, and when not preoccupied with running an OPAC search. As such, the observer judged both librarians to be quite approachable, based on: consistent eye contact; acknowledgment of users within a certain proximity, at which time the computer terminal no longer commanded their attention; a friendly nature, supported by frequent smiles and social laughter where appropriate; adept juggling of multiple users in the few instances where it happened; and occasional strolls through the computer banks to provide technical support where needed. The literature supports these non-verbal cues as indicating availability/approachability (Radford, 1998).

During the time between in-person reference interactions, L2 engaged in three activities. First, she placed two or three phone calls, all of which seemed to be related to

prior reference questions (perhaps referrals from other librarians or earlier patrons) or other library business. Second, she worked on the terminal at which she was sitting. Due to the placement of her monitor, I was unable to determine how she was using the computer. Third, L2 occasionally looked around the reference area, and specifically she patrolled the banks of computers, presumably to tell if others sought reference assistance.

### **Interest**

L2 seemed genuinely interested in the queries and concerns of the users with whom she interacted, focusing their attention on the user currently at the desk, and rarely turning away or breaking eye contact. L2 also made effective usage of backchanneling to reinforce their interest in the matter at hand, nodding and uttering an encouraging “uh-huh” or “yeah” wherever appropriate.

The only interaction involving L1 before her shift was up involved a user with a technical question—the Flash plug-in was apparently malfunctioning on the systems, and the user needed to load a site using Flash—to which was responded a rather curt “the systems administrator is not in today, but I will let him know.” The user seemed a bit put off, judging by the way he stepped to the side and furrowed his brow, and commented on how ubiquitous Flash websites are doubtlessly due to his expectations of such electronic information systems (Ross, 2003). The user thus makes an attempt at the fourth counter-strategy against negative closure, “the user refuses to accept the answer as provided.” (Ross & Dewdney, 1998) After a bit of reassurance indicating a modicum of interest on L1’s behalf, the user returned to his station seemingly more or less satisfied.

### **Listening/Inquiring**

Although the observer was seated closer to the reference desk than any other users, he was too far away to consistently hear the voices of the users. The observer is also inclined to think that many users tend to keep their voices down at the reference desk, potentially because of the stereotypical impression that librarians are just dying to hurl an impassioned “shush” in the direction of those who speak in anything other than whispers, but this phenomenon could be due to other factors such as the diffidence that some users doubtlessly feel when put in a position where they feel they must ask another for assistance. Although the observer’s position was partially concealed by a rack of Young Adult magazines, it is additionally possible, though unlikely, that some users spotted the observer and were made uncomfortable.

Nonetheless, the observer was able to discern most of the communication between librarian and user by paying attention to the librarians’ reactions, carefully (and possibly ineffectively) reading the lips of users, and reading their respective non-verbal cues. As stated previously, both L1 and L2 were quite skilled at engaging users in friendly, tactful discourse, using appropriate backchanneling and active listening techniques to ensure users that the answers they received were based not on a “canned response” but on the actual information needs they conveyed.

Unfortunately, nearly all the users during the period of observation had needs which did not warrant long reference interactions. As such, there were few if any drawn out reference interviews; most questions were of the ready reference, directional, or technical support types.

### **Searching**

Slightly over half of the reference interactions the observer witnessed involved some OPAC searching by the reference librarian. Due to location and the lack of an outward-facing monitor, the observer was unable to tell how L1 and L2 constructed their OPAC searches. Whatever their search terms were, they never took more than 30-45 seconds to begin and complete the OPAC searches, during which time they continued to engage the users so as not to leave them hanging in awkward silence. It should also be noted that neither L1 nor L2 seemed to share their search strategy with the users, thus it seemed to the observer that they focused more on satisfying users' needs quickly and decisively than on providing them instructions on how to find such information in the future.

While the observer was unable to determine how the librarians constructed their queries based on user input and reacted to OPAC results (i.e. modifying query terms, calling it quits, etc.), it was clear that L2 specifically was a strong proponent of leaving the reference desk to accompany users to their requested resources. In one instance, the librarian was asked to locate materials on productivity software (such as Microsoft Office) for a specific version of the Apple Macintosh (OSX). She was able to turn up related hits after running a catalog search, but could not find an exact match. She accompanied the user to the section of the stacks where such technical manuals are located and returned to the reference desk where she launched a few subsequent searches at Amazon.com, where she located what she regarded as a perfect resource. At this point, she called over L1 and they discussed the possibility of purchasing the title, concluding that it was a good decision for their collection development and also that they had the

funds to do so. When the user returned from the stacks empty-handed, L2 sought her out to notify her that they would be purchasing the title soon. Not only did this interaction grow the collection in a way that may benefit a number of other users, but it also demonstrated that the reference transaction is bidirectional, acknowledging and placing value upon the knowledge and desires of the user as suggested in the “Relationships with Users” section of RUSA (2003).

### **Follow-Up**

L2 made sure to follow-up with users before allowing them to go on about their business. In each reference interaction, the user was asked if (s)he were satisfied with the answer received. With surprising consistency, users admitted that their information needs were indeed met (though, admittedly, not in such language), at which point they were invited back should further questions have occurred to them. The observer acknowledges that it is likely this is the case due to the low traffic during the observation, and the relatively short period of time involved.

L1’s interaction with the user seeking a Flash plug-in fix did not end with very much follow-up at all, perhaps because L1 was ready for her shift change and knew the systems administrator was not around to bring resolution to the user’s issue. In fact, the user is left unsure if L1 will contact the systems administrator and have the issue fixed in a timely manner. No attempt is made by L1 to assure the user that he will be contacted when the problem is fixed.

An interaction between L2 and a particular user stands out. An elderly gentleman approached the reference desk, coming to rest his forearms on the edge leaning somewhat



over L2, and proclaims “I need help!” After a rather lengthy story filled with somewhat tangentially related anecdotes, the user was able to communicate that he has had problems accessing his Yahoo e-mail account lately, after having not used it in nearly a year. L2 walked him through creating a new Yahoo e-mail account and gave him access to one of the Internet workstations. After handling another reference interaction or two, L2 wandered back over to the computers noticing that the user was standing, an obvious non-verbal signal that he was having further problems with using Yahoo e-mail, and also that he perhaps felt a certain degree of diffidence about having to come to the reference desk again. L2’s attentiveness to the area around her provided wonderful follow-up to this particular user, as is indicated in Radford (1998), Ross & Dewdney (1998), and RUSA (2004): “roving ... is an excellent technique for follow-up.”

### **Conclusion**

Despite the short period of observation, low traffic at MSPL, and the decision to staff the reference desk with only one librarian, enough observations were made to put together a general evaluation of the reference services provided and give a good impression of how reference interactions are handled at least by two members of the MSPL staff. Though it is easier to provide solid reference service to users when there are fewer of them coming to the desk, the observer would evaluate the service at MSPL as notably effective. Although post-interaction interviews with the users were not conducted, each one seemed genuinely satisfied with their interactions, judging by non-verbal cues: nodding, smiling, and a sense that they did not appear either lost or

frustrated. According to Ross (2003), “users almost always attribute the success or failure of a reference transaction to relational factors” such as these non-verbal cues.

Nevertheless, there was also room for improvement. First, the reference librarians might encourage more users to approach by raising the inside of the desk up a foot or so, and sitting in higher chairs to ensure they are nearer to eye-level of the users. Staying at eye-level with the user is documented as having great effect on a user’s judgment of approachability, as this user from Radford (1996) indicated: “when [reference librarians] are not getting up from their desks ... you can see that they are not happy to look for something for you ...” Second, users may be more likely to come to the desk when librarians do not appear busy at the keyboard. Thus, they could shift the position of the computer monitor, and set up a dual monitor configuration so users can observe the screen of the librarians, a useful tool when involving the users in searching. (This same configuration is used widely in Rutgers’ New Brunswick Libraries.) Additionally, reference librarians could also set up a process for handling systems problems more consistently when the systems administrator is off-site, which would have potentially defused the awkward situation when L1 effectively waved her hands at her user’s technical problems. These improvements coupled with the social interaction skills already possessed by the librarians observed, as outlined in the RUSA guidelines, could easily boost the success rate of MSPL’s reference interactions to well above 69%, in the observer’s opinion.

## References

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