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Reference Interview Observation and Analysis

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Abstract

Reference interviews are a vital part of a library because they foster interaction between librarians and patrons that otherwise might not be available. Mabee Library, where a reference interview was observed for two hours with the permission of Mr. W., makes every effort to complete services on the reference desk in a setting designed to benefit the students. The opportunity to observe a reference interview provided an understanding of the skills which are necessary to facilitate the relationship between patrons and librarians.

Reference Interview Observation and Analysis

After receiving permission to observe a librarian, Mr. W., for one of his reference shifts from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Friday, February 13, 2009, it became apparent that librarians at Mabee Library strive to be part of an enjoyable experience for students. Reference work is considered central to their mission for the library, so much so that they track reference statistics on a database to ensure they are offering the best service possible.

The reference desk at Mabee Library, located on the campus of Washburn University, is centrally located in the middle of the main floor, with a direct line of sight to the front doors, out in the open where students have to walk by to get to other areas of the library, is right across from circulation, and within sight of the computer lab, which is helpful since the printer station is about eight feet from the desk. It is also surrounded by study areas and work stations, and is on a floor not reserved for quiet areas. Since the desk is in the middle of the busiest floor of the library, students have full access to it, and all the services that go with it.

Mr. W. remained on his feet for most of his shift, either walking around the printer station or greeting people with a smile and a hello when they walked in. He was visible and approachable to the patrons that did walk up to the reference desk with a question. Dewdney and Ross (1994) hypothesize librarians that employ welcoming body language when interacting with patrons is an integral part of “establishing contact and encouraging them to ask their question in the first place” (p. 225). Mr. W.’s non-verbal communication consisted of direct eye contact with patrons, a hello wave or nodding his head at incoming patrons, and sitting straight in his seat when he was not standing. Patrons seemed to approach the reference desk without hesitation, and were friendly in return.

Most questions asked had to do with printing. There was some confusion about how long the print jobs took, if the Washburn ID was needed to print, and if public patrons could print from the computers. Other examples were University related questions, such as where the Business Office was located, and if a certain person was working at the library on that day. There were also questions by students as to if a certain book was in the collection, and if Mabee carried any textbooks for checkout. Mr. W. handled each question with neutral questioning, focusing on finding out more information as to why the patron needed these books or information, or as Morris (1994) defines, using “an effective way of identifying the user’s information need during the reference interview” (p. 25).

One specific example was a question brought to Mr. W. by a student taking a Psychology class at Washburn. This student needed three to four articles to review for a paper on some aspect of Psychology she found interesting to her. Mr. W. began the reference interview by asking more questions concerning the class; whether it was an entry level class, what specific topic she was interested in, and more about the exact assignment. The majority of Mr. W.’s questions were open, with no closed questions in the interview. He also asked some neutral questions, specifically about how much experience she had researching articles in Mabee’s online databases. Consequently, Mr. W. ascertained from their conversation the student had very little experience researching information, and therefore asked what instruction she would like concerning the databases. Using neutral questioning, Mr. W. was able to politely help this student utilize the library’s resources without scaring or offending her. As Bopp and Smith (2001) discover, neutral questions help the librarians “see the question the same way the user sees it” (p. 56).

Mr. W.'s reference interview process with this student seemed to put her at ease, but also provided individual personal assistance while maintaining professionalism. Mr. W. was relaxed, but also helpful, and this combination presented an opportunity to actively listen to the student's needs and make her feel comfortable. Brown (2008) states, "Because patrons are often reticent, especially in face-to-face interaction, patience and tact may be required on the part of the librarian" (n.p.). Mr. W.'s interview process consisted of diagnosing the student's information need, prescribing her some relevant sources for finding the information, showing her how to apply the sources to retrieve the specific information, and in the end, evaluating her reactions to the interview process by asking if he could show her any other ways to access more information and offering to be of further assistance if she felt it was necessary. Judging from the reaction of the patron, Mr. W. was effective in his use of the reference interview process and covered all the required aspects.

Mr. W. demonstrated how to make use of Mabee's records using a general academic database called Academic OneFile. He showed the student in detail how to search the database in advanced mode using the specific topic she was interested in, which was youth counseling. Mr. W. then went through the articles Academic OneFile retrieved, focusing on full-text pieces and showing the patron what type of article it was; whether it appeared in a magazine, journal or book. While Mabee has some other databases reserved strictly for Psychology information, Academic OneFile is a great place for a beginning researcher because it is fairly easy to navigate and displays accurate results based on the search criteria.

Humor was an important aspect of this reference interview environment because it made the patron feel calm. During the beginning of the reference interview, the patron appeared introverted, but as it progressed, Mr. W. showed various instances of humor, joking about school

work and reading, and the patron relaxed. Mr. W. then asked the patron to follow him to a bank of computer stations, where he instructed her to use the databases, and by the end of the interview, she had become at ease with Mr. W. to where she was asking questions and responding to his queries. Without this humor, the reference interview might have made the patron feel uncomfortable. Mr. W.'s ability to listen to and appreciate the question, while adding a humorous tone, is just one positive characteristic of this reference interview.

One feature of the reference interview that could be improved upon was that although Mr. W. did ask the patron to follow him to the computer station, he did not interact with or try to engage conversation with her about her project until she was seated at the computer. While she seemed accepting of this, dialogue between the two would have given the impression of a more welcoming and casual interaction and possibly put the patron even further at ease, especially since she had never used the databases before, and that is what they were walking to do.

Mr. W. concluded the interview with the patron by asking if there was anything else she thought she might be interested in researching. He had just gotten done demonstrating search methods on the databases and after he asked that question, the patron stated she wanted time to explore the articles. Mr. W. also explained the printing procedures and told the patron that if she was to have further questions she could come to the reference desk for help. He then asked the patron if she was satisfied with the number of results. This would be a follow-up question and as Durrance (1995) explains, it "serves to indicate that the librarian is interested in the outcome of the question" (p. 254). The patron said she was but thought it would take a while to condense the amount of articles into useable knowledge for her paper.

The patron did appear to be happy with the reference interview, because she did thank Mr. W. for his help, and stated she would be frequenting the library more now that she knew

how to search on a database. While this observation of Mr. W's time on the reference desk ended before the patron was done interpreting the research, he was positive the 20 minutes he spent with the patron had a useful outcome for both him and the patron.

Mabee Library is beginning to move toward a future of technology because the librarians are searching for ways to keep students interested in using the resources. In addition to keeping online statistics of each reference question received while a librarian is at the reference desk, they also have two other interfaces open at all times. One is Meebo, the virtual instant messaging application, where patrons can communicate a question to the on-duty reference librarian. Mr. W. stated that feature is used frequently by patrons because it caters to undergraduate students, where the majorities are accustomed to technology. The other is an email interface, where patrons can email the reference librarian a question that should be answered by the librarian at the desk. The questions received on these two interfaces, along with the phone and walk-up interviews, are recorded in the reference statistics log, which is then tracked by the director of the library.

After shadowing Mr. W. for his reference shift, Mabee Library seems to be on the right track towards developing new strategies with technology to aid the reference interview. In addition to this, Mr. W.'s reference interviewing skills provide students an opportunity to discover the resources necessary to obtain the knowledge that is needed to further their education. By continuing to improve on these skills, reference librarians can develop an approach to the common understanding of what a reference interview needs to facilitate learning by patrons.

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