

Observation Analysis:

Face-to-Face and Chat Reference Services at the [REDACTED] Library System

Sarah Hashemi Scott

San José State University

Face-to-Face Reference Observation

I completed my face-to-face reference observation at the [REDACTED] Library, which is the largest library in Washington State's [REDACTED] Library System ([REDACTED]), a public library system serving residents of several cities and unincorporated [REDACTED] County ([REDACTED], 2010). According to [REDACTED]'s Web site (2011), the [REDACTED] Library, with "more than 325,000 volumes in its collection," "is a regional reference center for [REDACTED] and houses the most comprehensive and sophisticated reference collection in the system." I selected this particular library as the location of my face-to-face observation precisely because of its role as a regional reference center; I thought my chances of observing a large number of reference interactions would be high. I visited the library for my observation on Thursday, March 10, 2011, from 4:15 to 6:15 PM.

The [REDACTED] Library is located in the heart of downtown [REDACTED], Washington's fifth largest city and "the high-tech and retail center of [Lake Washington's] Eastside" (City of [REDACTED], 2006). The library is a multi-story building with street-level public entrances on both the north and south sides of the building. The library provides free parking in an attached garage and an adjacent parking lot; it is also served by several bus routes. When I visited, I parked my car in the adjacent lot and entered the building from the north. The north entrance opens into a long hallway, off of which are a series of meeting rooms, public restrooms, and a small book shop operated by the Friends of the Library. Near the end of the hallway is the entrance to the library itself.

Upon entering the library, I noticed several self-checkout stations, assisted checkout stations, the holds area, and a staircase, at the bottom of which was a desk labeled "Information" and staffed by a young woman, presumably either a library employee or volunteer. Because I

had used this library previously, I knew this was not the reference desk. The reference desk itself is prominently situated near the top of the staircase on the second floor, so that it is practically the first thing one sees as one reaches the top of the staircase; there are elevators nearby as well. The desk is labeled with a large sign reading “Information.” According to Durrance (1989), “Signage helps the environment make more sense to the user” but can be “at times a source of confusion” (p. 33). Because the same “Information” label is used on the desks at both the bottom and top of the staircase in this library, some patrons may be confused about the functions performed at each desk. However, since the reference desk itself is on the second floor, the Information desk on the first floor helps to establish an immediate “reference presence” as patrons enter the library. According to the “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers,” developed by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), one of the qualities that helps to ensure successful reference transactions is approachability; “this includes having Reference Services in a highly visible location and using proper signage...to indicate the location, hours, and availability of in-person and remote help or assistance” (RUSA, 2004, 1.1). Since the second floor reference desk is not “highly visible” to patrons immediately upon entering the library, the inclusion of an Information desk on the first floor helps to ensure that they can at least be easily directed to the appropriate area.

The [REDACTED] Library’s reference desk is equipped with two staff stations featuring computer monitors that swivel for viewing by patrons, a “ready reference” collection on shelves directly behind the staff stations, and an office supply station for public use at one end of the desk featuring supplies such as staplers and a three-hole punch. During reference interactions, patrons stand on one side of the desk, and staff can either sit or stand when helping patrons from the other side. The desk itself features a multi-level design, with the patron-facing side standing

taller than the staff-facing side; the countertop extends from the patron-facing side of the desk to form a shelf that extends over the staff-facing side. The area under the shelf is used to store staff supplies.

On the day of my observation, as I exited the staircase on the second floor, I looked around for a place to sit near the reference desk. There were some lounge chairs with low tables across from the desk and banks of public computer terminals with chairs to either side of the desk, but each of these seating areas was located at some distance from the desk itself. I tried sitting in one of the lounge chairs but quickly realized that I could not hear anything that was being said at the desk. I decided to ask library staff if it would be permissible for me to sit nearby so that I could observe.

As I approached the desk, I noted that it was staffed by two people, a man and a woman. The man was helping another patron, but the woman was free. As I approached, she made eye contact with me, smiled, and said, "Can I help you?" in a welcoming voice. She thus put me at ease, as suggested in the RUSA Guidelines (2004, 1.0). I explained to her that I was a student in a graduate program in Library and Information Science and was assigned to observe a reference desk. I asked if there was anywhere I could sit and unobtrusively observe. She allowed me to sit in an extra chair behind the desk, off to the side of where she and the other employee were working.

During the two hours of my observation, I observed seven different library employees working at the reference desk. The employees included five women and two men. They wore badges which listed their first names and job titles; most of them had the title of "Librarian," but at least one had the title of "Library Associate." Desk shifts changed at the top of every hour and in one instance at half past the hour. I will refer to the employees I observed as Ms. Red, Mr.

Orange, Mr. Yellow, Ms. Green, Ms. Blue, Ms. Indigo and Ms. Violet. I observed a total of 25 patron-initiated inquiries, which fell into eight general categories: library rules of conduct (2), questions about library services (1), computer/printer issues (3), directional questions (3), study room inquiries (3), supply requests (3), specific title look-ups (4), and reference questions (6).

The approachability component of reference success described in the RUSA Guidelines extends beyond just physical cues such as signage and the positioning of the reference desk; it also includes “approachability behaviors, such as the initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian, [that] will set the tone for the entire communication process, and will influence the depth and level of interaction between the staff and the patrons” (RUSA, 2004, 1.0). In general, the employees staffing the reference desk at the [REDACTED] Library seemed to fulfill the approachability requirements described in this section of the RUSA Guidelines, as they seemed “poised and ready to engage patrons” (1.2), “[established] initial eye contact with patrons, and [acknowledged] the presence of patrons through smiling and attentive and welcoming body language” (1.4), and “[acknowledged] patrons through the use of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation” (1.5). The most standard greeting employed by staff seemed to be, “Hi, how may I help you?” Because the desk had a fairly steady stream of business, with patrons occasionally lining up to wait for assistance when both library employees were busy assisting others, the employees did not have a lot of downtime between transactions. When they did, they usually chatted together or continued working on reference questions that were still in progress. The high level of patron activity at the desk suggested at least one aspect of approachability with some room for improvement.

Section 1.3 of the RUSA guidelines suggests that reference staff acknowledge patrons who are waiting for service by “[employing] a system of triage to identify what types of

questions the patrons have when more than two patrons are waiting.” During the periods of highest demand, when a line formed, I observed that the reference staff focused on the patrons they were currently assisting, while those who were waiting either stood in line or milled around; some even looked at *me* expectantly, as if I, because of my proximity to the desk staff, should be assisting them. One effective technique for handling such a situation would be for the library employee to briefly pause in her interaction with the current patron and say to the patrons in line, “Thank you for waiting; one of us will be with you shortly.” That way, those in line would know that their presence was acknowledged and that they would soon be helped. I did notice that anytime one library employee had to leave the desk and the second employee was assisting a patron, a third “on call” employee would appear at the desk. I was unable to determine how the “on call” person [REDACTED] Library wanted to implement the “triage” system proposed in the RUSA Guidelines, perhaps the “on call” person could come out to assist the patrons in line. This person could quickly answer simple questions not requiring the use of a computer (such as “where are the restrooms?”) and assure patrons with more in-depth questions that they would be assisted as soon as possible.

The second component of reference success described in the RUSA Guidelines is interest: “the librarian should be interested in each patron’s informational need and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance” (2004, 2.0). The guidelines describe various non-verbal behaviors that library staff should employ to demonstrate interest, such as “[facing] the patron when speaking and listening” (2.1), “[maintaining] or [re-establishing] eye contact with patrons throughout the transaction” (2.4), and “nodding...the head” (2.5). Most of the library employees I observed at the [REDACTED] Library reference desk displayed these behaviors in most interactions. More notable were the few interactions where interest on the part

of the library employee seemed to be lacking. For example, toward the end of my observation, when Ms. Indigo and Ms. Violet were working at the desk, a patron approached the desk complaining that the printer had not printed her print job. As Ms. Indigo was already assisting another patron, this question went to Ms. Violet. Rather than saying something along the lines of, "I'm sorry, I'll see what I can do for you," Ms. Violet just turned away from the patron, walked from one end of the desk to the other, reached into a drawer which was shielded from the patron's view, and pulled out a package of printer paper. The patron had a confused look on her face, as if she was not sure whether Ms. Violet had heard her. Finally, Ms. Violet walked out from behind the desk and started walking toward the printer. Her body language and lack of verbal communication suggested a lack of interest in this patron's inquiry. Another example in which the library employee failed to demonstrate interest was in a reference transaction in which a woman asked for a "landform map" of the [REDACTED] area for a school assignment for her fourth-grade daughter. Although the librarian, Mr. Yellow, spent a lot of time on the question, his searching failed to turn up an appropriate map. During the course of the transaction, he asked the patron if she had already asked "downstairs." She said yes, and that the person downstairs had sent her up here. When his shift ended and Ms. Blue came to replace him, Mr. Yellow started to go over the sources he had already consulted, and he told Ms. Blue, "she already checked in the children's department, and they sent her up here." At this, the patron interjected and said, "No, I didn't check in the children's department, I just asked at the desk downstairs" (i.e. the Information desk at the bottom of the stairs). "Should I check in the children's department?" she asked. "Yes, that would be great, and if they're not able to help you, then come back up here," Mr. Yellow responded. Rather than taking ownership of the question that he had already spent at least 15 minutes working on, Mr. Yellow passed the patron off to staff in

another department. Ms. Blue, having just walked onto the scene, seemed to be a passive bystander in the interaction, but she too could have expressed interest in the patron's question by offering to continue searching. Instead, the patron was sent off to ask her question of yet another staff person who would have no knowledge of which sources other staff had already consulted.

The third component of reference success described in the RUSA Guidelines is listening/inquiring, a component which the Guidelines explicitly connect to the reference interview: "The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process" (2004, 3.0). As we have learned through our course readings and discussion, there is some disagreement about the best types of questions to ask at various stages in a reference interview; Dervin and Dewdney (1986) described the "typical approach to interviewing" as "[building] on the user's first statement by asking a series of closed questions (i.e. questions which can be answered with 'yes' or 'no' or a specification of 'this' or 'that')" (p. 506). They went on to argue in favor of a "neutral questioning technique," a subset of open-ended questioning, which "[guides] the conversation along dimensions that are relevant to all information-seeking situations" (p. 508); they acknowledged, however, that "closed questions may be helpful for verifying what the librarian has heard" (p. 510). The RUSA Guidelines (2004) also acknowledge the usefulness of these various questioning techniques, both open-ended "to encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information" (3.7) and "closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search strategy" (3.8).

While the reference desk staff at the [REDACTED] Library did listen and ask questions when assisting patrons, I did not see a single interaction in which a full reference interview was conducted. While many of the questions asked at the desk (such as "May I borrow a stapler?" or "Do you have a study room available right now?") did not necessitate a full reference interview,

there were a few questions asked at the desk which may have been more effectively handled had a reference interview been conducted. To return to a previous example, a woman approached the desk and asked Mr. Yellow for help finding a “landform map” of the [REDACTED] area. Rather than asking an open-ended or neutral question, such as, “Please tell me a bit about what you have in mind,” Mr. Yellow responded with a closed question: “Like a topographical map?” The woman responded by saying she needed it for her fourth grade daughter’s school assignment, and that “on Google they have maps that show lakes but not mountains.” Mr. Yellow responded that “probably the closest thing we have are topographical maps published by the U.S. Geological Survey.” He then told the woman that those maps cannot be checked out but that photocopies can be made. He offered to show them to her, and the two of them left the desk together. A few minutes later they returned and I gathered that the maps they had seen were not what she needed, as he continued searching on the “Homework Help” section of the library’s Web page. It was at this point that he asked her if she had already asked “downstairs.” The transaction went on for at least 15 minutes without producing the type of map that the woman sought. Had Mr. Yellow started by asking the woman more questions and identifying her precise need, he may have been able to assist her more efficiently and effectively. According to the RUSA Guidelines (2004), the reference service provider “rephrases the question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood” (3.5) and “does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction” (3.9). Because Mr. Yellow made assumptions about what the patron wanted and didn’t take the time to fully understand her information need, he ultimately ran out of time and had to send her to another department for help.

The fourth component of reference success described in the RUSA Guidelines is searching: “many of the aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are...dependent on the

behavior of the librarian” (2004, 4.0). The Guidelines describe various elements of effective searching, such as “[finding] out what patrons have already tried” (4.1), “constructing a competent and complete search strategy” (4.2), and “[explaining] the search strategy and sequence to the patrons” (4.3). The searching strategies employed during my observation varied from question to question and employee to employee. The librarian whose search strategies I was able to most closely observe was Ms. Blue. In one interaction, a woman came and handed her a slip of paper on which she had written “wheat free casein free diet for autism” and asked for help finding a book by that title. The woman said she had looked up the call number but found a different book on the shelf with that call number and not the one with that title. Ms. Blue tried looking up the title the woman had given her but did not find it in the library catalog. She then asked the woman what search terms she had used. When she duplicated the woman’s search, she was able to find the title the woman was looking for, but the title was different from what the woman had written down. The woman said she thought she had seen the book that came up in the search but that she had been confused about the title, and she went back to the shelf to retrieve it. By finding out what the patron had already tried in her own searching, Ms. Blue was able to assist her quickly and efficiently.

The fifth and final component of reference success described by the RUSA Guidelines is follow-up: “The librarian is responsible for determining if the patrons are satisfied with the results of the search, and is also responsible for referring the patrons to other sources, even when those sources are not available in the local library” (2004, 5.0). In some of the interactions I observed, library staff successfully followed up with patrons to ensure their satisfaction; in others they did not. One example in which staff did successfully follow up involved Ms. Blue. A young man came to the reference desk and asked for “books on cubism in art history.” Because

of the background noise and high level of activity at the desk at that time, I was not able to hear the entire interaction, but I observed as Ms. Blue searched the library catalog, turning the monitor so that the patron could observe what she was doing and using limiters, such as those described by Bell (2007, p. 26), to search only for books that were checked in at the [REDACTED] Library, then printed out a list of available books on the subject and went over the printout with him. I then heard her ask him, “Is this enough to get you started?” He responded with an enthusiastic, “Yes, thank you!” An example of an interaction in which follow-up was less successful was the previously cited example involving Mr. Yellow and the patron requesting a landform map of the [REDACTED] area. Although Mr. Yellow did tell the patron to “come back” if the staff in the children’s department were not able to help her (RUSA, 2004, 5.2), he did not offer to accompany her to the children’s desk or even to call down on the telephone to let the children’s staff know what sources he had already consulted (5.8), and he did not offer to continue researching the question himself (5.6). He definitely did not “[take] care not to end the reference interview prematurely” (5.9).

Overall, the [REDACTED] Library provides effective reference services to the public. While there is room for improvement in certain areas, such as conducting a thorough reference interview, the staff excels in many areas, such as approachability, interest, and searching. In order to improve services, it might be helpful for staff to periodically review, discuss, and brainstorm ways of further implementing the RUSA Guidelines and other guidelines for the provision of effective reference services. Taking advantage of opportunities for continuing education would be helpful for staying up-to-date on developments in the field and staying focused on providing quality services. By continually reviewing and evaluating current services

against guidelines such as those provided by RUSA, the [REDACTED] Library can ensure that it not only meets the needs and demands of its users but also exceeds them.

Digital Reference Interaction

I completed my digital reference interaction on Monday, March 14, 2011. I utilized [REDACTED]'s "Ask a Librarian" live chat reference service. It was fairly easy to access this service from the [REDACTED] homepage; I simply clicked on the "Ask a Librarian" link under the "Research & Homework" heading, and then, after reading over the "About Live Chat Reference" information, which included a confidentiality statement and a link to the [REDACTED] privacy policy, clicked on "Live Chat Reference" to connect. The RUSA Guidelines, in the section on approachability, suggest that libraries "should provide prominent, jargon-free links to all forms of reference services from the *home page* of the library's Web site" (2004, 1.8, emphasis in original). In this regard, [REDACTED]'s "Ask a Librarian" digital reference service fulfills the requirement of approachability. I did not have to download any special software, though I noted that there were certain system and browser requirements which my computer met, so in this regard, I found the service also to be "convenient" (1.8).

Before connecting to the live chat reference service, I spent some time crafting my inquiry. I could not think of anything from my own life which would make a good question, so I spent some time brainstorming with my husband. I finally decided to pose as a college student doing research for a literature paper on steampunk. The service required me to input my question before connecting, so I included a fair amount of detail: "I am taking a college literature course and I am planning to do my final research paper on steampunk. I need information about the origins of the genre and a list of the pivotal works in the genre. I could also use help finding

some critical works on steampunk.” In addition to the question itself, I was required to enter my library card number, my name, and optionally, an email address, to which a transcript of my session would be sent. I noted that these requirements precluded the possibility of remaining anonymous while using the service. In addition, after entering the service but before connecting to a librarian, there was a link to the “Service Terms” (OCLC, 2008), which included a privacy statement distinct from that of [REDACTED] as well as several sections of legalese; connecting to the service indicated acceptance of the terms.

After entering my question and the required personal information, I clicked on the “Connect” button. The service utilized a split screen, with the chat window appearing on the left side and a co-browsing window on the right. Within about 40 seconds, I received a message in the chat window that “Librarian ‘Leigh [REDACTED] Librarian’ has joined the session.” I noticed that above the text input box at the bottom of the screen, whenever Leigh was typing a message to me, a message would appear that said, “Librarian is typing.” This helped me to know when I should anticipate a communication from her, also contributing to the approachability of the service, as I knew that she was actively engaged in assisting me.

In our chat reference interaction, Leigh demonstrated her interest in my question (RUSA, 2004, 2.0) by maintaining “word contact” with me. For example, after greeting me (“Hi Sarah”), she wrote, “I’ll see what I can find for you on steampunk” and then, a few seconds later, “Be right back...” Later, after she instructed me on how to perform a search in the Literature Resource Center database available through [REDACTED], she wrote, “I’ll see what I can find elsewhere while you look there.” She also responded quite promptly to most of the communications I sent to her throughout the course of our chat.

Wikoff (2008) describes “chat reference completeness criteria” developed by David Ward based on the RUSA Guidelines (p. 232). According to these criteria, which include “negotiating the question, providing source instruction, offering applicable keywords or subject headings to use for searching, and conducting a follow-up interview” (p. 232), Leigh conducted a successful digital reference interview. In my initial inquiry, I was quite specific about the types and variety of sources I needed, so she didn’t have to ask for clarification in that area. In terms of instruction, she guided me to a specific database (Literature Resource Center), giving me the keyword to search with, and let me know that she “didn’t find anything substantive in [REDACTED]’s other databases.” She also followed up with me by offering to send me additional information by email the next day; in her email message, she included PDF attachments of two articles she had scanned from reference materials at her library and concluded by stating, “If you need additional assistance, please feel free to write back.” She maintained a “receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner” (RUSA, 2004, 3.1) throughout our interaction, and she used questions (3.7, 3.8) to ensure that I was able to access the information she suggested (“Do you know how to get to [Literature Resource Center] from our website, or would you like me to send you directions?” “Do you need phone numbers for any of the libraries?”). Overall, she displayed exceptional communication skills.

Leigh displayed good searching skills (RUSA, 2004, 4.0), and she definitely “[used] appropriate technology (such as co-browsing, scanning, faxing, etc.) to help guide [me] through library resources” (4.11). After moving on from the [REDACTED] databases to the Internet, Leigh sent me links to some sources she found online, which showed up in the co-browsing window on the right side of my screen, and as previously mentioned, she later also sent me scanned PDFs of articles from reference books at her library. When she directed me to the Literature Resource

Center database, she “[explained] the search strategy and sequence...as well as the sources to be used” (RUSA, 2004, 4.3) and made sure that I understood how to use the database (4.5). I was a little disappointed that when none of the results from the Literature Resource Center database really fit the criteria I had established in my initial inquiry and none of the other [REDACTED] databases turned up anything “substantive,” her next suggestion was Wikipedia. I had consulted Wikipedia before initiating my chat interaction, and I had hoped to find something more authoritative. As Luo (2007) has pointed out, “With the wide availability of computers and the internet, it is very likely that a user is internet savvy and has already checked search engines and other resources before resorting to chat for help. Therefore, librarians cannot staff a chat reference service without extensive knowledge of electronic resources and effective searching skills that can keep them one step ahead of the general public” (p. 199). To be fair, Leigh did acknowledge that Wikipedia is “not an authoritative source in itself” and pointed out that the list of references at the bottom of Wikipedia’s steampunk article might lead to some good sources, and one of those citations actually led us to the reference book from which she scanned the two articles that she sent to me by email, so the Wikipedia suggestion was not fruitless. During the course of our interaction, she consulted several other sources, including the [REDACTED] catalog and her “sci-fi readers’ advisory book,” but neither of these led to anything useful. Overall, I was more than satisfied with the thoroughness and competence of her search strategies (RUSA, 2004, 4.2) and her explanations of search strategies (4.3) and the use of sources (4.5).

Finally, Leigh displayed good follow-up skills, as suggested in section 5.0 of the RUSA Guidelines (2004). Not only did she offer to send me additional materials by email the next day (5.6) and then follow through by sending them, but she also suggested references sources owned by [REDACTED] and listed the branches at which they were available, should I choose to visit in

person, and made sure I had access to the branch telephone numbers (5.7, 5.8). One area in which I think Leigh could improve is in ending the chat interaction. Although our chat went smoothly, at the end of the interaction, she closed the session before I had a chance to submit my final “good-bye” response. Section 5.9 of the RUSA Guidelines suggests that the librarian “Takes care not to end the reference interview prematurely.” She also mentioned toward the end of our chat that “we’re about to close.” Since the “Ask a Librarian” service is advertised on the [REDACTED] Web site as being available “24/7,” I found it a little off-putting to be reminded of the library’s imminent closure during my reference interaction. I would have appreciated her waiting to close the session until I had submitted my final message, especially since she could presumably see on her screen that I was typing. Overall, however, I appreciated all of Leigh’s efforts and her willingness to continue working on my question the next day in order to meet my information needs.

In conclusion, the service I received through [REDACTED]’s “Ask a Librarian” digital chat reference service exceeded my expectations. I had never used chat reference before, but I will strongly consider doing so in the future. Because of the lack of non-verbal cues, communication skills are of paramount importance in providing chat reference services, and in this case, Leigh displayed excellent communication skills. There are some situations where chat reference might not be the best medium of communication, but it is a great addition to a reference department’s service offerings.

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