

The Day I Walked in a Patron's Shoes at an Unfamiliar Library

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In preparation for my library observation on Tuesday, January 31st, I refreshed myself on the art of a reference interview. It is indeed an art that does not come naturally to most people. It is very detailed and specific. Before going to observe a reference situation, I had a good idea of the ideal reference interview. I knew what I was looking for. I had made myself a checklist of things to look for. I was ready and armed with information.

I knew that the ideal reference interview should start with a good greeting. Then it should move to open ended questions and the initial inquiry. Something like, "How may I assist you today?" is a suitable opening question. After the patron asks his initial question, the librarian should answer him with questions of her own. These questions should clarify what the patron wants. If the librarian must perform a search, then either it should be visible to the patron or the librarian should talk aloud so the patron can understand what is being done behind the scenes. The librarian then asks follow up questions like, "Does this help you?" or "Do you need anything else?" Then as a closing, the librarian reminds the patron to come back if anything else is needed. (Bopp and Smith)

I was ready to watch for the things mentioned above as well as the librarian's approachability, communication patterns, attentiveness, attitude, and follow up behaviors. I selected a library to visit and checked their hours online. The main branch of a large public library system from a nearby city would be open at 9am that morning. I gathered up all my notes and some blank paper and made my way to the library. The first thing I noticed when I got there was the locked door. I checked the time on my phone. It was 9:05. It should be unlocked. I looked at the hours posted on the locked door and was shocked to see that it said the library opened at 10am. Good thing I brought a book with me. I found a fairly comfortable bench and decided to wait it out. It was a nice day.

As 10 o'clock approached, more and more people gathered around the door. I watched them as I continued reading. The clock struck 10 and the small crowd that had gathered disappeared into the door. I slipped my book into my bag and went inside. This library was unlike any library I'd seen before. First, I saw a little window for returns. It reminded me of a drive through window. Several people from the crowd outside had simply dropped off their books and left again. I continued past the library window and saw an information desk. It was located right in the center of the main area with a large sign above it. There was an older woman sitting there, helping a patron. I started looking around for a desk to sit at so I could observe their interactions. The closest place was about 50 feet away. I knew I wouldn't be able to hear from that far away, but then, right next to those tables, I saw a sign that said "Reference desk." I had assumed that the information desk and the reference desk were the same. I decided to look around the rest of the library before settling down to observe.

I took out my notes and a pen and begun my observation of the reference librarians. There were two that I saw right away. One was a strange looking man with green pants, a purple shirt, and bright red hair. I will call him Mr. Librarian. I should admit that I made assumptions about him right away and they may have carried over into my observations. I didn't think he looked very much like what I thought a librarian should look like. I didn't think he'd do a good job. The other reference librarian was a woman with shoulder length blondish-grey hair. I will call her Mrs. Librarian. She was wearing a sweater and jeans. She looked nice. Again, I made assumptions about her that were somewhat carried over into my observations.

As a patron approached, I imagined what I would do as a reference librarian. My first instinct was to smile and say "Good Morning!" I was disappointed by both of the librarians' reactions. Mr. Librarian simply stared into his computer screen. Mrs. Librarian glanced up and

saw the patron but did not say anything. She may have smiled, but I could not see her face. The patron asked for a book by title. Mrs. Librarian said, "Okay" and started typing away on her keyboard. In a few seconds, she picked up a pencil and wrote what I'm assuming to be the call number. The patron took the paper and said, "How do I find this?" Mrs. Librarian smiled and said, "I'll show you!" The two of them went off in the direction of the fiction books. That was something I was watching for: the librarian accompanied the patron to the book. Mrs. Librarian gets one point!

I continued to watch. I found it quite amusing. I saw a gentleman walk by who looked lost. Even though I knew nothing about this library, I found myself wanting to ask, "Can I help you find something today?" I was further disappointed in Mr. Librarian's failure to see or offer to help this man. He wandered around for a few more minutes before finally sitting down next to the periodicals. Mr. Librarian was still staring at his computer screen. He had not looked up in quite some time.

Mrs. Librarian came back and returned to her computer. She was always much more approachable. She'd smile at people as they walked by and would speak in a nice tone of voice. She'd answer the phone with a smile and help the person on the other end appropriately. She asked several clarifying questions to make sure she understood exactly what the phone patron wanted. She said, "You wanted something about the Korean War, correct?"

She saw me looking at her several times. I'd smile and look back down at my notes. (Later, I told her who I was and why I was at the library.) The patron she had helped find a book earlier came back and wanted to make a copy. She pointed at the copy machine and told her how much it cost. The patron went over and made her copies without any problems.

A few times Mrs. Librarian would say, "Here's where the book is, if you can't find it, come back and I'll help you with it." Mr. Librarian rarely said much. At one point, he did suddenly leave the desk and go to the OPAC's (right next to where I was.) He had some cords in his hand and connected a few to a computer there. He grumbled as it didn't work and reconnected some other cords. I had another strong urge to ask if he needed any help. However, I held back. Finally, the computer came on. He took the "out of service" sign off and promptly disappeared into a back room. I didn't see him again for a while.

Meanwhile, another female librarian came and sat at his computer. I'll call her Mrs. Reference. She rarely smiled, but she did ask more clarifying and open-ended questions. She, like Mrs. Librarian, simply searched for things on the computer without letting patrons know what was happening. When asked directional questions, she simply pointed. She was much older, and perhaps had knee or leg problems. When she did finally leave the desk, she was limping slightly. Perhaps that is why she wouldn't go with patrons to find things. I did notice that when someone came to ask her a question, she didn't put down her pencil or stop typing. I'm not sure if she even made eye contact with them or not.

At this point in the day, I decided I'd take a break from observing and look at the books. I went to the OPAC and started searching for various things. I went to the shelves and looked at the books. I wrote down the titles of everything I wanted to read. I knew I couldn't check out any books because I rarely visit this city and would not be able to return them. One of the books that I wanted to look at had a reference call number. I realized I hadn't discovered the location of the reference section yet. I went to the reference desk. Mr. Librarian was the only one there. I went to him and waited for a few seconds for him to acknowledge me. Finally I said, "Excuse me, Where is your reference collection?" He pointed at it and told me it was over under

the east windows. I thanked him and headed in that direction. Little did I know that the book was not actually on the reference shelf. I went back to him and asked if he could help me find the book I was looking for. He asked what the title was and started typing away. Finally, he said, "Hm... That book has is not available for patrons to check out." I knew this already because it's a reference book. I told him I just wanted to look at it for a few minutes. He said, "Okay, let me check." I stood there waiting. Then he said, "It's going to take a few minutes. Why don't you come back and check with me in a few minutes?" I didn't understand why I had to leave or what he was checking that would take that long, but I went back over to the reference books and started looking through a couple that caught my eye. In a few minutes, he came over to me with the book and told me I could look at it only if I gave him my library card. I explained that I didn't have a library card so he said I could give him my driver's license. I pulled out my Missouri Driver's license and handed it to him. He seemed a bit shocked at the out of state identification, but said that would work and handed me the book. I looked at it for a few minutes then copied an interesting section out of it. When I returned to the desk to return the book, he was once again, staring at his computer screen. Finally, he said, "One moment." I told him I just wanted to return the book. He began explaining about the drop box and circulation desk. He had not looked at me yet. When he did look up from his screen, he saw me and apologized. I returned his book and he returned my license.

I thought this entire encounter actually taught me more than the observation itself. I went up to the reference desk thinking that I knew what I wanted. I had the call number and the title of a book I wanted. I just needed to know where the reference books were. I am a librarian after all. I can find a book. The question I had originally asked did not help me in the least. I asked, "Where are your reference books?" I honestly thought if I knew that, I could find the rest.

I'm sure many patrons are like this. When I came back, I admitted I needed more help and gave the librarian the title. He then commenced his search and discovered it was in another location at the library. Perhaps it was somewhere similar to a ready reference book kept behind the reference desk, but he didn't explain to me the difference in call numbers from regular reference books to this particular book. I'm still not sure where the book was, but I do know that I didn't really know what I wanted when I first approached the desk.

I observed a while longer, but didn't see much change in the three librarians' behaviors. Eventually I went to the information desk (because I wanted to see if this librarian's behavior was any different) and asked about local places to eat. A broad grin came across Mrs. Information's face. She asked, "What kind of food do you like?" This was new, finally an excellent clarifying question. I told her that I liked Mexican food and that I wanted the restaurant to be within walking distance. She wrote down a few restaurants and told me about them and how to get to them. Then another librarian walked by and Mrs. Information asked her for some help. They both worked together on this seemingly simple question. Mrs. Information and I began conversing and I learned that she had graduated from ESU's SLIM program about twenty years ago. I didn't leave the library right away. I stayed for another 20 minutes looking at a few more books. On my way out, Mrs. Information asked me which restaurant I had decided on. I told her and she smiled and said that was her favorite. She had excellent follow-up questions. It wasn't until then that I realized none of the other librarians had really asked any follow-up type questions.

Over all, I'd say most of the librarians at the reference desk need at least a little bit of help. I would not return to Mr. Reference again if I went back to that library. I would most likely not even return to the reference desk. I would go to the information desk and ask my questions

there. If they referred me to the reference desk, I would go there, but not as a first choice. I'd imagine a few of the patrons, especially the man who was never greeted, would not return to the reference desk for help. There were a few patrons who were satisfied, but their questions were fairly simple and hard for the librarian to mess up.

According to several readings, this behavior that I found during my observation was not uncommon in libraries. Dewdney and Ross (1998) mention numerous examples of failure to ask follow up questions (p. 1), referring patrons to a rather broad area (p. 2), typing into the computer without speaking to the patron (p. 2), simply trying to get rid of the patron (p. 3), or simply disappearing (p. 6). I found this shocking. To me, a librarian is paid to help patrons. As a librarian, I would do whatever it takes to find the correct answer for the patron. For a librarian (or even a patron) to settle for this kind of behavior is shocking. Dewdney and Ross mention that many librarians are actually very skilled in "the art of terminating the reference transaction" (p. 3). Granted the question might not be the easiest to answer, I am paid to answer questions. I could sit there and do nothing or I could help someone out by answering their question.

Overall, I say the day of my reference observation was a very enlightening one. I learned not only how NOT to be a reference librarian, but I also learned that patrons are coming to expect that sort of bad behavior from librarians. To make someone smile, all a librarian would have to do is smile first and be sincere about helping. I'm not sure whether to say my job is easy or it is hard. It's easy to make the patron smile since so many librarians don't seem to care, but for that same reason, it's going to be harder to answer these questions because the librarians that do care are going to get the more difficult and tricky questions.

References

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