

THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

Coral Ridling

I am both delighted and honoured to be here this morning, as your guest. Public Librarians regard themselves as being at the bottom of the pecking order whereas Theological Librarians, I imagine, are way up, perhaps even surpassing University Librarians. You - and I may be wrong, have a predictable clientele, whereas ours changes every minute. Certainly in the field of the Dewey 200s, our questions and requirements are much more basic.

I am a practical librarian and where theory and practice jockey for position, I will take the practical aspect every time. You are not going to receive from me an erudite address, just a few simple rules about "The Reference Interview". It is all so straightforward and once learned, the Librarian does it automatically. That is not to say that when we are tired, stressed, hungry, it's five minutes to closing time and there's a bus to catch, we aren't tempted to say 'Come back tomorrow' - but persevere we do, with a reference interview albeit in double quick time!

We're not perfect but we try and perhaps we all have sympathy with the librarian who has battled with a lady for fully half an hour. When finally the lady plaintively says "But where do I go now?" The librarian bluntly said "Go home!"

Today when people talk about their job they use such phrases as - 'a step in my career pattern', 'committed', 'they are upwardly mobile'. You are compelled to listen to me for the next half hour or so, so I may as well tell you where I stand. I'm a pit-face librarian, continually on the public floor since I started as a junior library assistant on 31.12.1945 (I can hear you mentally calculating!). There isn't a morning since that date when I've not wanted to go to work (and as this is a theological gathering, I wouldn't dare not tell the truth!)

I've spent 26 years in community librarianship and nearly 18 as a Reference Librarian and I still feel the excitement of using mind and experience to find the answers to questions which still challenge. And the only reward necessary is seeing the gratification on the face of the patron

(AP's new word for user, although if you've been around as long as I have, you will know that that was the term I was trained to use when I was 18).

If I could see into your minds I might be able to read thoughts like - "Who does this old girl think she's fooling!" - or more hopefully - "Well, yes, I can see that that is possible". If you can't see it's possible, then you're in the wrong job. If you can, then you are ready for or busily proving the delights of the cut and thrust of the daily battle of retrieving from your patrons, the essence of what they require and leading them to the answers.

There are two types of reference librarians. Firstly those who have the natural gift and flair for greeting each inquirer as if they were old friends and consequently can engage in conversation from the word go. They are as rare as gold and just as valuable. I have on my staff a young Intermediate assistant who quite often greets the next person in the queue with "Hello Sunshine - what can I do for you?" I've even heard her address a middle aged Indian gentleman with "Your turn, Fred". Very startled he looked about him to see where Fred was. I've been guilty of a similar approach myself. Still on the phone when a gentleman approached the desk, I waved him to a seat. As I hung up the phone, I said to him, with a wide smile, "I'm all yours!"

The second and by far the larger group have to work at getting alongside the person on the other side of the desk.

This somewhat frivolous approach to my session is done for a reason. I want you to think that librarianship is FUN, whether you practise your skills in a children's library, public library, business library or a theological library. We have stereotyped ourselves to such a degree that it is like fighting to get out of prison, trying to persuade our patrons we are normal human beings with the added bonus of having been trained to treat each person who enters our library as the most important person for whom we cannot do enough. (Mind you this is sufficient in itself to scare away patrons, who are used to self service, instant this or that and hurry along the queue please.)

The desk I mentioned earlier, is a decided barrier. You will all know that when you are carrying a load of books, that is the moment when your users see you at your most vulnerable and therefore most approachable. You are away from the desk!

The catalogue is another barrier. Whoever thought that the public could find their way through the filing rules needs their head read! The public couldn't care less if half the entries for Gt. Britain are G.B. dash and the other half G.B. full stop. It hardly makes sense to a librarian let alone the user. So when they see you expertly flicking your way through the cards, of course they latch on to you. Computer catalogues are a godsend. They file A-Z with no thought of whether it should be dash or full stop.

And so we come to the Reference Interview.

First some Do's and Don't's

Do have a desk which is inviting - normal height with comfortable chairs in front so that you are on eye level with your patron and you are both relaxed. If you prefer a control type desk or have inherited one, with a shelf above hiding all your bits and pieces, be warned - it gives off signals of Keep Away, I'm Busy.

Do keep your machinery to one side so that no barrier exists.

Do use your machinery. **Don't** rely on your memory. Your patron is impressed as you whizz in and out of a database or dance round a catalogue searching for an elusive heading.

Do smile.

Don't be afraid to say - the patron asked you a sticky one!

Do say "Well, we'll track this down together."

Do collect a stack of opening phrases. "Yes" is very off putting and anyway try and smile while you're saying it. Very difficult.

"May I help you" is hard to beat but it does become monotonous.

Do try phrases in your conversation like "Are you finding everything you need?" "Are you writing a paper?" "Have you used this (indexes, set of volumes) before?" "How did you hear about it?" "Is this a personal interest of yours?"

Do listen.

Don't interrupt once the patron gets going.

Don't point.

Do get up off your chair and show a willingness to share the inquirer's quest for information.

Do make yourself a Where to Look File.

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Why do we have to define types of reference interview?

Why do we have to train ourselves and our staff in the art of reference interview?

What is it about us that makes people phrase their questions in the broadest way possible?

Why do the professional journals continually devote pages to the reference interview?

The answer is easy but we who live comfortably with books and catalogues are very uneasy at accepting the answer.

WE INTIMIDATE THEM

To them we are obsessed with order - our shelves have books in order - they are classified with a series of numbers which defeat them - we live by the alphabet (and if you are in the business of interviewing new staff you will know what a foreign field that is to many). We have rules - no smoking, no eating, no drinking, no transistors, no walkmans playing loud enough to disturb, no talking at study tables. They think we are all highly qualified and breathe rarified air or at the other end of the scale we are part-timers who have a nice job sitting at a desk and reading books all day.

We always look busy - book in front of us, pen poised.

They don't want to appear ignorant of what libraries are about. They do not wish to disturb the halcyon peace. They haven't a clue about how to start their search but they are not going to let you know - just a lead is all they want and they'll do the next. So they take the broad view and ask for the largest category.

Like the girl who asked me for History. We got it down to European history, then to English, then to 18th century, then to books with pictures, then to pictures with people in them, then to coloured pictures, then to Costume and finally to patterns of 18th century English costume - she was going to a fancy dress party and wanted to make a dress! What was the matter with me that she couldn't rush up and say "I'm going to a party, I want to run up something - have you patterns for an 18th century female costume?" I could comfort myself by saying my grey hair put her off, but the same thing happens to the 25 year old assistant.

Now for the Interviews - only four types - simply stated so the roles stand out.

Neutral Question -

"The first step to active listening is to stop talking"

Librarian: Are you finding everything you want?

Patron: Well I'm just browsing. You might be able to help me. You see, in a weak moment I said I'd do an article on Sunday Schools for the Church Newsletter. Well - you know how it is - nobody volunteered and everyone looked at me, because if you even speak up at a meeting and seem capable of stringing two sentences together, bang you're it if they want a speaker or someone to write an article. Well, as I said, I was at this meeting and said "What's happened to Sunday Schools? Why aren't they thriving like they used to (peers at Librarian to ascertain age). You must know what they were like! So here I am all ready to go. Hey, perhaps you can help me. I've written the article and I just want a few line drawings of children looking at a Bible or listening to a story. A picture or two makes the article interesting don't you think?"

If the Librarian had interrupted at the first mention of Sunday School or even the second, the thread of the conversation was lost and the real enquiry might never have revealed itself.

Open-ended Question: - "Yes and No are banned words"

Librarian: May I help you?

Patron: I want to know where the section on Indians is.

Librarian: Which Indians interest you - Spanish, Indians, Indians of North America, Inhabitants of India, Fiji Indians?

Patron: I want the wigwam sort.

Librarian: They will be the Indians of North America. What particular aspect interests you?

Patron: Religion really.

Librarian: Now you've chosen a really wide subject. Can we narrow it down to something specific?

Patron: The Psalms

Librarian: Now we're really going to work at this one together.

Have you read something recently about the Psalms or the Red Indians?

Patron: Somebody was quoting from a Red Indian translation of the 23rd Psalm and I'd like a copy of all the words.

Closed Question:

Patron: Have you got a concordance?

Librarian: Yes - do you want a King James concordance?

Patron: No.

Librarian: Well, then a Revised Standard Version.

Patron: No.

Librarian: Perhaps a Good News version

Patron: Yes

Open and Closed Questions:

Patron: Have you ever been to Ephesus?

Librarian: Well yes I have, have you?

Patron: No

Librarian: Are you thinking of travelling there?

Patron: No

Librarian: Well you started the conversation, what is it about Ephesus which interests you?

Patron: The reading on Sunday was Acts 19 v.24-41 and I wanted to know more.

Librarian: I'll get a Bible and you can point out to me what you would like to know

Patron: *Later*, - that's it - the Silversmiths

Librarian: Why do the Silversmiths interest you?

Patron: I do a little jewellery making as a hobby and I thought I'd like to know about the models of the Temple of Diana (Artemis)

Librarian: You just want a picture of the Temple?

Patron: Yes

If library journals are not printing articles on how to conduct a reference interview, they are devoting space to how badly reference librarians answer questions and that world-wide the average of correctly answered questions is no more than 55%.

It is my personal opinion that such surveys are the brain children of administrative staff and as such, reflect only fleetingly the hurly burly of the public floor and the number of satisfied clients. The surveys rule that all questions should be double checked for accuracy - have the makers of the survey sunk into a chair with relief that they'd actually found a mention of what they were looking for- if it took an hour to find one mentioned, two hours it must be for a verification and even then it could be different. Try finding two encyclopedias which give the same population figures for Pitcairn Island! Wedding toast lists vary from country to country - which is right - and we've all been to those New Zealand weddings where the toast list goes on and on and we long for the wedding with just one.

When the surveys are compiled by librarians on the floor is the time I shall start to believe the results. One final touch and it is only that, for sometime in the future a session on interviewing patrons of other races is worthy of consideration. Rudimentary protocol is taught in larger libraries and those of you who work with Polynesian students must have much to impart to the rest of us. Influxes of Asian students present another facet. The reference interview goes on and on, ever changing. The reference librarian must do the same.

I want to end on another frivolous note - taken without permission and cut about from a Library Journal article, it is called:

Stupid reference questions: on how to win foes and irritate people.¹

If asked to list the ten most demanding professions, few people would mention librarianship. Most folks believe librarianship to be a snap. One merely sits at a desk all day waiting for questions. If the questions can be answered, great, but if not, that's fine too, for the librarian is paid even if the question can't be answered.

¹ Library Journal, October 15 1985. Mark Plaiss. Stupid Reference Questions.

If it were only that simple! The public just doesn't realise that librarianship is a high-pressure job. Daily, librarians are asked questions that cover the gamut of human knowledge. They are peppered with questions about science, poetry, mathematics, art, medicine, music, agriculture, business and philosophy. They are harried to find names, addresses, formulas, recipes, combinations, and quotations. But it's not these questions that cause the ulcers, heart attacks, and spastic colons. No, the gray hairs and ugly brown spots are caused by the stupid reference question.

Decorum demands that sport not be made of either the patron asking these questions or of the query itself. Such mockery, it is believed, is gauche and unprofessional. It would be as if a physician chuckled at a patient suffering from some hideous affliction or a priest laughed at some contrite soul in confession. Such things are just not done. Pure bosh, of course. I say it's time librarians strike back.

I know what you are thinking. Sure, this sounds great, but how can I do these things and still keep my job? Be subtle. Don't bray like a jackass.

Undoubtedly, everyone has a favourite stupid question, some flash of ignorance, that is permanently impressed upon the mind. Below is an exchange between an illiterate adolescent and me. I shall remember it always, and follows, here, verbatim.

Adolescent: Do you have any English books here?
MP: A book about England or English literature?
Adolescent: No, an English writer.
MP: You want a book written by an English author?
Adolescent: Yeah.
MP: Fiction or nonfiction?
Adolescent: Fiction, I think.
MP: Any particular period?
Adolescent: Wha?
MP: Do you want an author from any particular period?
Say, Victorian or neo-classical?
Adolescent: Just an English writer, man.
MP: How about Dickens?

Adolescent: Who?
MP: Charles Dickens.
Adolescent: Is he English?
MP: No, he was Yugoslavian.

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The Librarian's Dilemma



Halfway up the stairs
is the stair where I sit.
It isn't very pleasant
but I have no choice about it.
I'm only the Librarian
—I'm not upon the Faculty
The Admin doesn't want me
so I don't know who I am.

So:

Halfway up the stairs
is the stair where I sit
I go there and I sit
and I ponder what it means
And I think that I will sit here
until somebody wants me...

For: Halfway up the stairs
isn't up and isn't down
It isn't in the library
and it isn't in the grounds.
So all sorts of funny thoughts
keep running through my head:
It isn't really anywhere
It's somewhere else instead!

—Peter Mendham (apologies to AAMilne)