

ADAPTING THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW TO THE SPECIAL LIBRARY SITUATION : DIFFERENCES IN PHILOSOPHY

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The difference between the reference interview in a special library situation compared with the same transaction in a public library is that the interview - and the results which stem from it - are the major performance appraisal parameters of a special library. The professional accountability of the special librarian will hinge mainly on the quality of the information given. This is the cutting edge of special library practice, and whilst it places considerable stress on the librarian, it also sets the adrenalin flowing, and with luck will often bring the sweet taste of success.

A lot of the transactions can be likened to fast food consumption - the information is required on the wing - it has to be satisfying - it is consumed, but if it does not plug the appetite instantly, and the quality is unsatisfactory, the customer will go to another outlet next time. Similarly, as with any other commercial enterprise, the quality of the product can be measured by the size of the market it retains. If the customers are satisfied they will return, but otherwise they will seek alternative providers of the product. When a library has as its catchment an in-house clientele, it has a captive market. However, because of the commonality of the organisation, lack of performance by the library staff is almost impossible to disguise. This performance is measured daily. One unsatisfactory or inaccurate answer to an inquirer will effectively blunt the credibility of the library. Weeks, months, or even years, of quality service can be destroyed by a careless response to a query.

Another critical difference between public and special libraries is the perception of the role of librarian. In a public library the librarian is seen as the dispenser of the information. To a certain extent the librarian is in control of the information, and will release as much, or as little, as they may so decide. Within the special library context the information is regarded as the resource of the organisation and the librarian is seen more in the roles of co-ordinator and facilitator. It is definitely a service role, and the measure of service expected from the librarian will match the level of service expected from other professional staff within the

organisation. This high expectation of the role of librarian enhances the reputation of our profession and it is important that the expectation continues to be met.

These prefatory remarks may be a little daunting to those of you who have not worked in special libraries, but I feel that they have a relevance to all librarians. Within the climate of the special library the primary responsibilities of the librarian are to understand the structure, politics and goals of the parent organisation and to supply the information required to meet these aims. This requires a continuing intellectual commitment to keep up to date with the developments which are happening within the organisation. You may wonder what all this has to do with the reference interview, but unless you understand these basic concepts one cannot operate effectively within the reference interview situation in a special library.

In 1984, Professor Anthony Debons, Professor of Information Science, at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Pittsburgh, was the guest speaker at the Annual General Meeting of the Auckland Chapter of SLISS. He described the course, which he had set up at Pittsburgh, to develop librarians into what he called 'Information Counsellors'. He believes that the following steps are necessary in the supply of information if one wants to evolve from a librarian to an information counsellor, ie. from the grub to the butterfly.

1. Knowledge
2. Comprehension
3. Application
4. Analysis
5. Synthesis
6. Evaluation

I think that this is a very good description of the stages to go through in the reference interview situation. Most special librarians follow this progression. We have transformed from grubs to butterflies without realising it. I intend to use Professor Debon's six points and go through them systematically with you as a useful methodology for conducting the reference interview.

Firstly - Knowledge

You will recall that I stated in my earlier remarks that the primary responsibility of the special librarian is a continual intellectual

commitment to the structure and operation of the parent organisation. This means that the librarian must have, at the very least, a superficial knowledge of the subjects involved, with the ability also to recognise the technical and commercial terminology. I think that it also demands a current awareness of the area in which the organisation operates, and in many cases this would mean a global awareness. Added to this, it is my contention that one of the major contributions that a special librarian can make in an age of specialists is accepting the role of perhaps the last of the generalists. This also includes cultivating a wide knowledge of current affairs.

Secondly - Comprehension

Unless one has knowledge one does not have comprehension. I realise that we could probably have a semantic argument over these terms, but one has to be able to comprehend something. When the inquirer asks the question the librarian has to be able to comprehend it, even if it is imperfectly. It is an essential part of the reference interview that in the early stages the inquirer has a degree of confidence in the librarian. If this is not generated by comprehending the request the interview will not be completed successfully.

Thirdly - Application

This third step transfers the result of the convergence of knowledge and comprehension to a further more practical stage. The librarian should now be able to retrieve information from the library resources or from bibliographic aids, either printed or electronic. There is a further inference at this stage. The librarian should have an in-depth knowledge of the library stock. There are many disadvantages of small, special collections, but the disadvantages are offset if the librarian has a thorough knowledge of the collection and a reasonable comprehension of the subject matter. The collection is then utilised to its greatest extent.

Fourthly - Analysis

Once a selection of material has been located, an analysis of the result of the search must be made. The specific needs of the inquirer should be analysed so that the material meets the required intellectual or/and technical level. For example, it would illustrate a lack of professional judgement to supply an accountant with an academic or scientific paper on a topic. It would be more appropriate to find the information in an economic or commercial publication. Conversely, a chemist would want the scientific paper.

Fifthly - Synthesis

The selected material must be put together in such a manner that it makes a coherent package. It should have a structure and consequential flow of development of the subject. The librarian needs to scan the material and ensure that it develops the theme and does not just regurgitate the seminal work. Unless one is asked to supply an exhaustive search - very unusual unless it is a basic research query - an intelligently selected package is what the inquirer wants.

Sixthly - Evaluation

At the end of the transaction the quality and relevance of the material should be evaluated in an interview with the requester. Unfortunately, sometimes it is only at this final stage that it becomes evident that the material was not as suitable or useful as the librarian had supposed. This is a sensitive time for both the inquirer and librarian, as both parties can be embarrassed by the end result. Often it is the inquirer, because they have been supplied with exactly what they asked for, but not what they wanted; or the librarian because they have made a fundamental error in assumptions earlier in the process. It is here that the fragility of the butterfly needs to regress to the more hardy grub!

I have always found this final stage a real learning process - ongoing throughout one's career. The processes of knowledge and comprehension are enhanced and developed each time this evaluation stage takes place. So finally, what are the qualities expected of a special librarian which will raise the success rate of the reference interview? I have thought long and hard about this and offer the following attributes:

- the intellect of a Mastermind
- the patience of a saint
- the deductive powers of a Sherlock Holmes
- the hide of a rhinoceros
- and a highly developed sense of humour to laugh at it all.

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