

Re-Envisioning Reference as Outreach

Promoting Reference Services in the Wake of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic has changed theological education and reference services. Today a growing number of students are studying and accessing the library remotely, and some libraries have found their reference numbers declining. Does reference still matter? If so, how best can we promote reference services to students who may never see us at the reference desk? Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been excellent studies on theological libraries' services for distance learners, but there have been few studies on reference services in particular. Studies on the promotion of reference services in academic librarianship predate the pandemic, and further research is needed on how theological libraries can promote reference services in the wake of the pandemic. This study addresses that gap by exploring how we can re-envision reference as outreach to better reach students today. It looks at the vital nature of reference services in supporting academic success, equity, wellness, and connection and examines current challenges to reference services and to reaching students. Finally, it looks at innovative strategies for promoting reference services in the wake of the pandemic through partnerships, Personal Librarian programs, communications, instruction, events, and engaging services. I argue that reference is vital today and that we need to be proactive in promoting it.

INTRODUCTION

In my first position 10 years ago, I worked as a Reference Librarian at Pitts Theology Library, and I sat at a busy research desk near the library entrance. Students came to the desk to ask questions all the time and their peers followed suit. I loved reference. I loved working with students and faculty and answering all their questions, from in-

depth research questions to “how do I use the scanner?” I’ve worked in reference and outreach for 10 years – first at Pitts and then at the City of Toronto Archives, where I supervised Reference and Outreach. I have provided in-person and virtual reference, and at the City of Toronto Archives I led an initiative to transform reference services for the digital age. I also love outreach and thinking of new ways of doing things and like to think of myself as adaptable to change. I was thrilled when a theology librarian job came up at the University of Toronto’s John W. Graham Library during the COVID-19 pandemic re-openings in early 2022 and I was so excited to work with students again. Well, adaptable me was in for a surprise when I learned that many students would be continuing to study online and that UofT Libraries were generally no longer staffing in-person reference desks. I was filled with a sense of dread. Would students still ask reference questions? Would they even know that reference services existed?

I soon learned that UofT Libraries were not alone in no longer staffing reference desks and that they were not alone in serving a growing number of online students. I also learned that I was not alone in asking questions about how best to promote reference services today, as more students learn online particularly in the wake of the pandemic. So, I turned to the literature. There is excellent research from theological libraries on services for distance learners since the pandemic (Miller et al. 2022; McLean and Beard 2021; Aaronberg 2020; Elia 2020; Mitchell 2020; Schmidt 2020; Schulz 2020; Stutzman and Board 2021) the Burke Library at Columbia University (Deanna Roberts, but these studies do not tend to focus on reference. In the broader field of academic libraries, there are studies on the promotion of reference services (Albuero and Brant 2021; Aguilar et al. 2011), but these studies predate the pandemic and tend to focus on in-person services. I wondered: How can we, as theological librarians, promote reference services in the wake of the pandemic? Today, we will explore that question and talk about how we should re-envision reference as outreach. We will look at the value of reference, the challenges we face in promoting reference services today, and strategies for promoting reference services.

THE VALUE OF REFERENCE

The first question is: does reference even have value? Not everyone thinks it does. When I was in library school, we had a panel of librar-

ians come in and the topic of reference came up. One librarian argued that reference was a waste of librarians' time. She argued that reference work was below us and that we should be focusing on collection development and on our own research. Another librarian argued that reference was vital to students' success and to the library's work. He talked about the joy of doing reference and its impact on students' work. So, which one was it?

Shortly after graduating, I got a job at Pitts Theology Library and I had the chance to do reference work and think about the value of reference. I was on a team of three reference librarians, and we were busy. We took turns staffing the reference desk Monday through Friday and we also offered reference services via email and by chat. And I found that reference had great value, particularly in four areas.

Academic Success

First, reference helped with academic and scholarly success. We had many experiences of students coming to us for research help and then coming back to tell us how helpful it had been for their research. On the annual survey, students commented on the librarians being knowledgeable and always available to help.

It was great to answer questions from faculty as well. One faculty member was looking for an English translation of an essay by Albert Schweitzer that he had seen referenced in a book. The translation had not yet been published, but we found it in the translator's unprocessed papers at Syracuse University and got a copy for the faculty member. He was thrilled and used it in a book he was writing. I am sure you have stories like this too.

Equity

Second, I found that reference helped with equity. We had students from a range of backgrounds and students who were in second careers, were learning English, or were single parents. It was great to get to know them, to answer their questions, and to help them in doing excellent research. As Jade Albuero and Nicolette Brant argue in their 2021 study, reference has the radical potential "to serve as a vehicle for equity and inclusion, a means for reaching out to marginalized populations who face barriers in fully utilizing library services" (Albuero and Brant 2021, 148). Reference can "break down barriers to inclusion, which can be particularly overwhelming for marginalized groups in academia" (Albuero and Brant 2021, 149).

Wellness

Third, I found that reference supports wellness in general. Reference librarians are there during a stressful time in students' lives, particularly as students write major papers and finals. Through reference services, we provide support and are there to help students and listen to them. On the annual survey, students would comment on how we were friendly and always available. They commented on how we helped them get through stressful times and said that librarians' overall friendliness "brightened up the life of researchers." I have always thought that there is a definite pastoral care or social work aspect to reference work.

Connection

Fourth, I found that reference services provided an opportunity for connection. We had students who came back again and again. My colleague Bo noted that he could look out over the reference room and know what each student was researching. It was great to have that research community.

Overall, I found that reference was vital to students' success and to the library's work in supporting and fostering research.

CHALLENGES TO REFERENCE

Although reference has value, there are some major challenges to students' use of reference services.

Perennial

First, there are some perennial challenges. One is a lack of awareness. Students often do not know that reference services are available, or they do not know what kinds of questions they can ask or who to ask. I certainly did not when I was in school.

Another is that students are often hesitant to ask for help. They may feel embarrassed or have what Constance Mellon termed "library anxiety" (Ferer 2021, 68). Perhaps they feel that they should already know the answer. They may worry that they are bothering the librarian or wasting the librarian's time. There can be cultural barriers as well. At a recent library workshop on supporting international students, we talked about cultural differences in directness, assertiveness, and personal disclosure. Students may be hesitant to ask questions due to some of these cultural differences.

Recent and Post-Pandemic

In recent years, and especially in the wake of the pandemic, there are additional challenges that may prevent researchers from asking reference questions. First, there has been an increase in online reference and often a move away from the physical reference desk. This shift was happening before the pandemic. Paulita Aguilar notes that there has been a dramatic decline in face-to-face reference in the last 20 years (Aguilar et al. 2011, 343) along with an increase in online reference (Aguilar et al. 2011, 345). There are some advantages to providing reference services online. Students can ask questions from anywhere and the questions are often more in-depth than that ever-popular question at the reference desk: “Where is the bathroom?” But there are also downsides to moving away from a physical reference desk. In-person, students see us and when they ask simple questions and see that we are friendly, they may be more likely to ask more complex questions. Online, students do not see us unless we put ourselves out there.

There has also been an increase in online education, particularly since the pandemic. Many of us are supporting online and hybrid courses or seeing whole programs move online. It can be a struggle to connect with students who we may never see in person and if our reference numbers go down, we may wonder if they are really needed anymore. But we have seen that reference has enormous value for academic success, equity, wellness, and connection. Students still need reference, even if they do not know about it. So, how do we promote reference services to students today, many of whom are learning remotely?

RE-ENVISIONING REFERENCE AS OUTREACH

The key is to re-envision reference as outreach – to do what Aguilar calls “reverse reference” (Aguilar et al. 2011, 348). Instead of waiting for researchers to come to us, we go to them, proactively integrating ourselves into the communities we serve (Aguilar et al. 2011, 344). At the Graham Library, we have found six strategies that work in promoting reference in the wake of the pandemic. I will give you some background on the Graham Library and then look at the six strategies we have used in promoting reference — strategies that have had a great impact on our reference services.

The John W. Graham Library

The John W. Graham Library is one of 44 libraries at the University of Toronto. It is a small library with eight staff and a collection of about 200,000 volumes. The library supports undergraduate students at Trinity College in programs like International Relations and Ethics. It also supports graduate theology students at the University's two Anglican colleges: Trinity College and Wycliffe College. There is one librarian to support theology: currently me. In total I support about 250 students, a third of whom now study online. I provide all theological reference services and instruction, do theological collection development and outreach, work with our rare books, and manage the Wycliffe College Archives. Trinity and Wycliffe College are two of the seven schools that make up UofT's Toronto School of Theology. Each of the other schools has its own library as well.

At the Graham Library, we provide reference services via email, over the phone, in person, and over Zoom. Students can drop by and talk to us in person, or they can email us with questions or set up a time to meet in person or over Zoom, whatever works best for them. When I began as Theology Librarian, reference was quiet. We wanted to grow our reference services and find ways of reaching theology students in the wake of pandemic. To do so, we used six strategies that had a strong return on investment.

Partnerships

The first was partnerships. Aguilar describes partnerships as “two-way streets defined by mutual respect for what each brings to the table” (Aguilar et al. 2011, 347). I started by scheduling one-on-one meetings with faculty, staff (including registrars and communications staff), administrators, and student leaders. At these meetings, I told them about the library's work, including our reference services. I also asked about their work, and I asked about opportunities for us to collaborate and support and engage with students. Some great ideas came out of these meetings and the meetings led to invitations to teach in classes, attend events, and attend student group meetings, which were all great opportunities for meeting with faculty and students and promoting reference services.

Personal Librarian Program

One of the results of these meetings was that I started a Personal Librarian program for theology students. The program was mod-

elled on a similar program for first-year undergraduate students at UofT, in which I am also involved. Essentially, first-year students are paired with a librarian and that librarian is their go-to person for research questions. The Personal Librarian sends students friendly emails throughout the term with research tips and an invitation to reach out with questions about their research. Personal Librarian programs can build greater engagement by providing a one to one line of communication between students and a designated librarian and by putting a face on library services (Ferer 2021, 70), which is key in the digital space. Personal Librarian programs can provide students with a connection to the library and make the library more welcoming and less intimidating, and they are fairly “simple to devise and manage” (Henner 2023, 150).

The Graham Library has been participating in a Personal Librarian program for undergraduate students for many years and our Director, Kate MacDonald, had the idea of extending the program to graduate theology students. To build the program, we connected with both colleges and got the email addresses of all incoming students. Then, I created emails in MailChimp with a welcome message to students. I included images to make the emails warmer and more engaging and included my photo to put a face on reference services. I shared services available to students in a friendly and conversational tone and I put reference services up front, encouraging students to reach out to me, their Theology Librarian, with questions. I then sent emails throughout the year with tailored updates. For example, at the end of term I sent a message with tips for Finals.

When first-year students were on-site, we also hosted a Personal Librarian event. The event was catered to all Personal Librarian students, including undergraduates and graduate theology students. It was a chance for students to meet each other and meet their Personal Librarian. We had coffee and treats and enjoyed getting to meet students. We even answered reference questions at the event.

If you do not yet have a Personal Librarian program, I encourage you to explore this option. It is not a lot of work and is a great way to connect with students. If you are the only theological reference librarian at your library, you can send tailored updates to all first-year students, as I did. If you have a larger reference team, you can divide theology students by last name and assign each set of students to a librarian.

Communications

In addition to the Personal Librarian program, I promoted reference through communications. I worked with student leaders and created a welcome letter for incoming students that went in all orientation packages, inviting them to reach out any time with research questions. I also shared emails with the entire student body throughout the year using the college listservs and Wycliffe College's monthly newsletter, the *Morning Star*. In these emails, I tried to have a friendly and welcoming tone. I encouraged students to come to me any time with questions. Since students do not always know what they can ask, I gave examples of the types of questions they could ask. I always saw a bump in reference questions after these emails went out.

I also worked with our Outreach Assistant to develop a poster and social media campaign. We thought about the types of questions that students could ask and developed posters and social media posts with these questions and the answer, "Ask Rebekah!" We developed graphics that read "How can I use citation software?" "Ask Rebekah!"; "How can I find the best materials for my research?" "Ask Rebekah!"; and so on. We put up posters around campus and shared the graphics on social media. On the graphics, I included my email address for one simple, clear line of communication and included my name to personalize reference services.

Liaison & Instruction

Fourth, we put a bigger emphasis on liaison and instruction. I doubled our orientation offerings and told students at each session to come to me anytime with questions. I gave them examples of the types of questions they could ask: how to get started in their research and find the best sources, how to track down hard-to-find sources, how to cite or use citation software, and so on. I also partnered with a faculty member to launch a brand-new series of hybrid Study Skills Workshops on topics like research, writing, editing, and citation. We had an average of 20 students, in person and online. At each session, I told students about reference services and encouraged them to reach out to me any time and I tried to be integrated into all the classes that were being taught.

In September, I sent an email to all faculty offering to come into their classes to teach. I got a few responses, but I wanted to reach more classes. In January, I took a different approach. I emailed each faculty member individually and by name. I asked if they could add

me to their course page, offered to come into their class, and let them know about reference services. The individual attention really made a difference, and I got a lot of response — almost too much. I was invited to each course page in Canvas, where I created a module on research help. Here I shared research tips with students and shared my contact information, inviting them to contact me any time with questions. Many faculty shared a blurb about reference services in their syllabi and sent an email to students about reference services as well.

I ended up being invited to teach 21 instructional sessions. These included virtual, hybrid, and in-person sessions. It was a great chance to promote reference. At each session, I talked about reference services and encouraged students to reach out to me. I found that reference numbers went up after each instructional session.

Events

Fifth, I attended and presented at events. I attended in-person and virtual events at both colleges. These were great opportunities to connect with students. I also worked closely with student organizations and faculty and they invited me to present at events. For example, the Wycliffe Graduate Society holds weekly lunchtime events for virtual and in-person students and has a guest speaker each week. I presented at multiple events. These were a great opportunity to get to know students and learn about their research. At each event, I emphasized reference and encouraged students to ask me research questions any time and many of them did.

Providing Engaging Service

Finally, a key strategy is to provide engaging reference services. When students have a positive experience, they often come back and spread the word with each other – a form of word-of-mouth marketing. I try to be available and flexible. Aguilar talks about the importance of meeting users where they are in a virtual environment (Aguilar et al. 2011, 343). I always offer to chat via email or to meet students in person or over Zoom, whatever is most convenient for them, and I try to schedule reference meetings at times that are convenient for students. For example, some of our students work full-time, so I schedule reference meetings at lunchtime. I also try to be dedicated and resourceful in finding answers to their questions, whether resources are at our library, online, or at another institution,

and I try to answer questions quickly and follow-up to be sure I have found what they are looking for. I try to be empathetic and friendly. I love the advice in last year's Atla Annual presentation on "Outreach and Promotion to Distance and Online Learners" (Miller et al. 2022). I aim to get to know students even if we are connecting over email or Zoom. I try to have a friendly, personable tone and try to really listen to them to hear the things they are stressed or excited about.

RESULTS

We have seen positive results from these strategies. In particular, we have seen stronger awareness and enthusiasm for reference services, higher numbers of reference questions, and ongoing evidence of the value of reference services.

Awareness & Enthusiasm

It has been exciting to see students' awareness of, and enthusiasm for, reference services grow. When I talk about reference services at events and instructional sessions, it is exciting to see the lightbulb turn on. I will often get a barrage of questions from students, saying: "I've always been hesitant to ask questions. I'm never sure what I can ask"; "Wait can I ask you about finding sources for my thesis?"; "Do you answer questions about citation?"; "If I'm having trouble finding a source, can I reach out to you?" To which I reply with an emphatic "Yes!"

It is exciting to see students' enthusiasm grow. I had one student who reached out to me with a question about exegesis. She was skeptical at first and not at all excited about exegesis. But, as I took her through the exegetical research process, she became more and more enthusiastic. She was excited about the sources and said my enthusiasm for exegesis was contagious. Afterwards, she sent me a note to say thanks and that our meeting was life giving. She has continued to come back with questions since.

Number of Questions

I also saw our number of reference questions go up. In the summer, things were quiet (as expected). Numbers went up in the fall, and in the spring, numbers went up 1.5 times, to over 150 questions — many of which were quite in-depth. I had students reaching out for the first time, researchers who came back again and again, and re-

searchers who told their friends. Some days, I was answering six or seven in-depth questions, from finding an obscure archival source to developing a bibliography for a dissertation.

Value

Third, I saw ongoing evidence of the value of reference services. Students frequently tell me that our research consultations have helped them to be successful in their projects. For example, I had the privilege of helping a doctoral student find a primary source that started her major research project. I also continue to find that reference services help with equity. We have students from various backgrounds and walks of life. I have been working with one student who recently came to Canada as a refugee. He and his family have been adjusting to life in Canada and learning English. It has been an honor to work with him and support his research.

Wellness

I also continue to find that reference helps with wellness. Students comment that research assistance has lightened their lives, has been life-giving, and has been a support in the midst of a stressful school year. They comment that they appreciate having someone to listen.

Connection

Fourth, whether virtual or in-person, I continue to find that reference provides a great opportunity for connection. Students come back time and again and it is great to get to know them and their research. I have one doctoral student who comes to see me with each chapter of the dissertation.

CONCLUSION

While more students are studying online, reference still matters. Reference has great value not only for academic success, but also for equity, wellness, and connection. I hope that we will be empowered to share the value of reference with our administrators, faculty, and students. But to bring that value to our communities today, we need to re-envision reference as outreach and take a proactive approach to promoting reference services. We have looked at six strategies for promoting reference services through partnerships, Personal Librarian programs, communications, instruction, events,

and excellent services. I hope these will provide inspiration as you engage with your communities and promote reference services at your institutions.

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