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POINT OF VIEW

Fear of Reference

By BARBARA FISTER

Last year, I asked a number of graduating seniors why they thought some students were reluctant to use our library's reference desk, and what we could do to make the service more appealing. The most creative suggestion I got was to move the reference desk to a more private spot, so that nobody would face the humiliation of being seen asking for help in public. I toyed with the idea of installing a disused confessional: "Bless me, librarian, for I am lost."

Why do undergraduates find it so embarrassing to ask for help in a library? They have the sensitivity of a telemarketer when it comes to calling a professor at home to clarify an assignment due the next day. They will blithely e-mail a total stranger with outrageous requests ("Hi, Jacques. I'm writing a paper on deconstruction, but your book is sort of confusing. Could you explain exactly what you mean by *différence*? Thanks. P.S. It's due Wednesday.>").

But displaying ignorance in a library is another matter. Surrounded by computers and books and journals chosen specifically to support their learning, students are embarrassed by those riches -- or, rather, by the fact that what they need is somewhere in all that bounty and they don't know how to find it. To make matters worse, the place is full of fellow students who all appear to know exactly what they're doing.

What is it about libraries that makes students speechless with anxiety?

Those who screw up their courage to go to the reference desk often begin in a confessional mode. "I know this is a dumb question" is a typical opening gambit, followed by what the student thinks is the sort of thing one should ask: "Where do you shelve books on, like, Native Americans?" An experienced librarian knows a real question is in there somewhere, and after delicate probing finds out that the student actually wants to analyze the social and economic impact of casinos on reservations. In the next 15 minutes, the student might indeed learn where books about Native Americans are shelved, along with an idea of where else to look; more importantly, the student will have a better understanding of how to do research.

Teasing out what nervous students actually need can be tricky work. Without being too invasive, the librarian must assess what the assignment is, what level of sophistication the student brings to it, and how much information the student can absorb.

Depending on those factors, the response to a question may become a lesson on how to construct a focused search in a specialized database. It may lead to a trip into the stacks, where the fine art of browsing can be modeled for a student who hasn't had much experience with academic forms of discourse and doesn't realize that full-text searches can be performed without a computer. It may involve looking over citations to articles, discussing what features distinguish scholarly writing from journalism. Or it may be a matter of sorting through the results of a Google search, pointing out the clues that indicate the quality of a Web site. Usually, it involves a combination of those approaches -- an on-the-fly, personal research tutorial. What it rarely involves is providing an answer.

Some of our faculty members have discovered a cure for their students' anxiety. In addition to scheduling workshops in the library for the entire class, they require each student to use the reference desk as his or her work progresses. In some cases, a librarian must sign off on a preliminary bibliography -- an opportunity to discuss where else the student might find good material, or why some sources may not be particularly good ones. Other professors ask students to come up with three questions arising from their work and to note down what they learn about those questions from a librarian. The questions are often a bit forced, but the conversations they start are always opportunities for learning. Somehow, being required to use the reference desk absolves the student of that strange burden of shame.

They have no reason to be ashamed. Libraries are complicated places. Digital access has made research appear to be easier and faster, but it has also given rise to a confusing array of choices. Experienced researchers constantly use filters that they aren't even aware of. In my own field, I know enough context that I can reject inappropriate sources almost instantly and seize a promising lead when I see it. But if I had to find information in an unfamiliar discipline, I wouldn't know a core journal from a marginal one, a tantalizing clue from a dead end. We ask our students to make such choices all the time, without realizing how much being able to choose wisely depends on a knowledge base they lack and experiences they haven't had.

Students arrive at college with very different exposure to libraries, computers, and the written word than their counterparts did a decade ago. Then, a librarian might have introduced an electronic database by saying, "It's like the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*." Show students a copy of the *Readers' Guide* today, and they're baffled. What are all those little numbers about? How are you supposed to get an article from that? They are so attuned to searching full-text databases and printing articles one at a time that they have little sense of an article's having been written for a specific publication that comes out in a chronological sequence. They are often unfamiliar with the way books work. I was taken aback the first time I had to explain to a student how to use an index in a book. He allowed it was a great concept -- he just hadn't run into it before.

We renamed the Web link to our library catalog so that it said bluntly "search for books." The only catalog most students are familiar with is the one that lists courses. Quite logically, they were clicking on the link to *Books in Print* in our library catalog. Others just went straight to Amazon.com, printed up a list of titles, and asked which ones we had. Our students aren't stupid, they simply make logical

choices based on previous experience.

David Bartholomae, head of the English department at the University of Pittsburgh, has said that students have to "invent the university" when we ask them to write competently in different discourses, each with their own rules of evidence, argument, and expression, none of them familiar. I would argue that students sent into the library to work on a paper or presentation must invent themselves as scholars -- but we often neglect to explain what that really means, other than giving them a byzantine set of rules on how to cite sources and dire warnings about plagiarism. It's not surprising that they think research is a process of finding answers, transcribing them, and documenting where they came from. Research papers become a synthesis of quotes with a moral tacked on at the end.

I've had students come to the library with a truly exciting research topic -- one they could explore intelligently and support with evidence -- only to drop it because they couldn't find a source that had already said exactly what they wanted to say. Originality is perceived as a violation of the rules. That is obviously a misunderstanding. But how can undergraduates invent themselves as scholars? The reference desk is one place a novice can learn the ropes.

Unfortunately, many librarians find the reference desk unexciting and passé. A movement is afoot to digitize the process -- after all, if we don't get with the program, people might Ask Jeeves instead. The Library of Congress and the Online Computer Library Center, a global library cooperative, have developed a service called QuestionPoint, which will route questions to libraries around the world (see [an article](#) from *The Chronicle*). A sleepless student in Wyoming can e-mail a question to his or her library at 3 a.m. and get a quick answer from a librarian in Wollongong, on the other side of the world. An improvement on Jeeves, perhaps -- but it still won't provide what our students need.

First, most information cannot be digitally delivered to anyone, anywhere. As Thomas J. Mann, a reference librarian at the Library of Congress, has pointed out, not only does copyright law protect intellectual-property owners from such profligate reproduction, but much information is not digitized and never will be. Second, the plan presumes that information exists in some vast, neutral space without reference to context. The hidden assumption is that "global" means in English, and relevant to American cultural norms.

But most important, the idea is flawed because it supposes that students approach the reference desk knowing what their question is. A librarian who is face to face with a nervous student can read all the subtle cues that he or she sends out in the struggle to articulate a question. The local librarian knows the context of the student's curriculum and the collection that was created to support it. With that information, the librarian can model some basics of scholarly inquiry: how to translate a vague idea into terms that can guide a search, how to probe in various directions, how to recognize different forms of discourse, how to learn from mistakes.

Rather than creating a global, virtual reference desk, let's improve the local collaboration between professors and librarians to help students overcome their embarrassment. The reference desk, analog

and unglamorous as it may be, is the perfect place to ask dumb questions -- dumb only in the sense of being unvoiced. The student won't leave with an answer, but with something far more important -- a better idea of how to ask a good question.

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