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**Reference Desk Consultation Assignment: An Exploratory Study of Students' Perceptions of Reference Service**

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## **Reference Desk Consultation Assignment: An Exploratory Study of Students' Perceptions of Reference Service**

Abstract:

This paper describes the experience of three sophomore English composition classes that were required to visit the reference desk for class credit. Student perceptions of reference consultations are analyzed to gain a clearer understanding of the students' attitudes towards reference services. Findings of this exploratory study indicate that students still suffer from library anxiety and are much more likely to seek out reference help if they are convinced that a consultation will save them time.

## **Introduction**

As an English composition instructor and an information literacy librarian who collaborate to teach sophomore classes, we want our students to take full advantage of the library's reference services. However, it has become painfully evident to us that including the following "tip" on college composition assignment descriptions will not result in student action: "Our class librarian is available for help in locating sources for your research paper." Though students will nod in fascination as the course instructor delivers her spiel about librarian expertise – explaining such baffling concepts as "Boolean," "peer-reviewed," and "discourse community" – we have come to realize that neither discussing nor writing about this largely untapped resource actually spurs student initiative. Geoffrey Nunberg's observation that "most people will fall back on perfunctory techniques for finding and evaluating information online" is validated in our experience every semester [1]. We have concluded that where there is no will to consult a librarian, there is no way it will happen.

Recent research corroborates our experience in the classroom and library. During a library study on subject searching in the library catalog [2], students who had conducted unsuccessful searches were asked what they would do next to locate the information they needed. Though they were searching the library catalog in a library, not one student mentioned asking a librarian. This is just another example of a larger trend. Librarians are being asked less and less for help. According to ARL, reference transactions have dropped 51% since 1991 [3]. In recent years there have been many debates about the nature and utility of the reference desk, largely in response to declining reference statistics. Libraries have attempted to combat this decrease in demand by offering

reference services in new ways. Librarians have experimented with new forms and technologies to conduct reference consultations. Some reference desks have entirely disappeared; some have merged with other library service points. While reference librarians have many different views about what a reference consultation should or could be and what role the reference desk should play, our study focuses on students' attitudes. Despite falling reference desk transactions, do students perceive one-on-one consultations with a reference librarian as useful?

To answer this question, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study at Utah State University. USU is a land-grant university with roughly 14,000 students enrolled full time. For our study, USU students in three sophomore English composition classes received classroom library instruction and were then required to visit the reference desk on their own. After completing the reference consultation, they filled out an informal anonymous survey about their experience. All participating students were from classes taught by the same instructor and librarian. In addition to informing the debate and experimentation surrounding the reference desk and describing the reference desk consultation assignment, our study's primary objective is to assess student perceptions of reference interview transactions. A clearer understanding of students' attitudes towards reference services is a necessary step towards theorizing strategies for reversing the downward trend.

## **Literature Review**

Many published articles have focused on students' perceptions of reference services. In her 1998 article, Massey-Burzio describes focus groups that were conducted at Johns Hopkins University in order to gain student and faculty insight into reference

services. Thirty-eight students and faculty members were interviewed about reference services. She found that patrons were not comfortable asking for help, often found service points unhelpful, and had an overblown sense of their own library skills. She also reported that there was a “lack of interest in [library instruction] classes” (212). She recommended that professional librarians be clearly recognizable and better marketed to the campus community. Massey-Burzio also suggested that the “teaching/learning library philosophy as practiced in formal classes” be dropped (214). However, a more recent analysis of ARL data by E. Stewart Saunders indicates that library instruction actually “increases the demand for reference services” (38).

At Central Missouri State University, 201 undergraduates were surveyed concerning their perceptions of reference collection and reference librarians. Sandra Jenkins concluded that “students do not have a clear perception of the reference collection or the reference librarian” (239). Barbara Fister discussed students’ “Fear of Reference” in a 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* column and called on librarians and professors to collaborate to create more meaningful reference experiences for the student. Gremmels and Lehmann investigated students’ and librarians’ perceptions of learning in reference consultations. They found that students not only saw reference work as instructional but also “understood the connection between reference instruction and their in-class instruction” (495).

### **Reference Desk Consultation Assignment**

In our classes we found that convincing students to value reference librarians’ skills can be accomplished most effectively by actually incorporating a reference consultation into a larger writing assignment (read: with points attached). On their own,

students often overestimate their ability to locate credible information. Nunberg makes this point using results from a Pew Project survey in his article, “Teaching Students to Swim in the Online Sea.” He remarks:

There is a paradox in the way people think of the Web. Everyone is aware that it teems with rotten information, but most people feel confident that they can sort out the dross. . . 87% of search-engine users said they found what they were looking for all or most of the time. . . [yet] only 38 percent of search-engine users were aware of the difference between unpaid and sponsored search results, and only 18 percent could tell which was which. [4]

The end result of this naiveté in composition classes includes embarrassing reference lists (e.g., “.biz” websites, *The National Enquirer* articles, or the grandmother of them all, Wikipedia entries), or worse: sources that only relate to the research topic in remote ways.

When hearing that librarian consultations are a required part of the research project, students utter a collective sigh; however, they often comment afterwards that they experience a “breakthrough” in their information search during the consultation with a librarian, as is evidenced in the following remark from one of our post-assignment surveys:

I didn’t think they [the librarians] could really help but they looked in resources I didn’t know about or consider but yeilded [sic] results...she [the librarian] was very approachable and helped me find several odd resources relevant that I wouldn’t have found otherwise.

The reference desk consultation assignment not only leads to better student research

performance but also provides an experienced group of library users to study. These students have had many interactions with librarians, and our exploratory study focuses on these transactions.

At USU, the Merrill-Cazier Library emphasizes library instruction; consequently, all reference librarians carry heavy teaching loads. Library instruction sessions are course-integrated, and general education English composition classes in particular participate in multiple library instruction sessions per class per semester. Sessions include traditional librarian-led classes as well as workshop time. During the series of instruction sessions for any given class, librarians will usually demonstrate searching and spur class discussion; but students are also given hands-on research time and can consult one-on-one with the librarian.

In Spring 2008, three sophomore English Composition classes visited the Merrill-Cazier Library for a series of four library instruction sessions led by a librarian. In addition to those sessions, we attached a reference desk assignment to their Persuasive Research Paper. Students were required to attend a 15 minute reference desk consultation with a detailed research proposal in hand. We instructed them to steer the consultation and be headed in a specific research direction. At the consultation, students gave the librarian working at the desk their names, and librarians recorded the names in a file kept at the desk for the class records. The reference desk assignment was worth 20 points and was factored into the final Persuasive Research Paper score. Since the paper was worth 150 points total, the maximum score a student could earn on this last and most heavily weighted assignment without completing the reference desk consultation assignment was 130 out of 150, or 86%, a B.



## Methodology

At the end of the semester, after the assignment due date was past, an informal, anonymous survey was distributed to the students. The survey consisted of open-ended questions:

1. What time does your class meet?
2. What was the most useful thing about consulting with a librarian?
3. How would you rate the approachability and helpfulness of the librarian you worked with?
4. What was the biggest challenge in doing your research?
5. Would you consult a librarian again for another research assignment?
  - A. Why or why not?
6. If you did not do a consultation, what was the reason you chose not to?

Among the three classes, 76 of 85 (89%) students completed the survey.

After collecting and closely reading students' responses, each student's survey was coded with tags signifying themes the student mentioned. This coding technique is described by Gorman and Clayton as "the key to meaningful data analysis" and allows us to create "new descriptive configurations" from the responses to the open-ended survey questions [5]. In effect, coding the responses allows us to look for common themes and associations among the survey results.

To create tags with which to code the responses, common words, phrases and meanings were looked for in the students' open-ended responses. For instance, many respondents valued librarians who offered a new perspective in their research process, so the tag *different insight/perspective* was created. A few of the responses that were coded

with this tag used phrases like “second opinion,” “different ideas,” “different views,” and “getting more ideas,” when answering question 4, “What was the most useful thing about consulting with a librarian?” *Relevancy* was coded to a response not only when the word relevant was present but also when the student described, for example, “finding applicable resources” or “finding the right information.” More examples of tags and their corresponding survey responses are included in Table 1.

Specific tags were not found to be exclusive to certain survey questions. That is, while more of the *relevancy* themes were found in response to question 4, this theme was also found in response to questions 2, 3 and 5. Indeed, a few of the *relevancy* respondents reported *relevancy* themes in more than one question response. Because almost all the tag themes could be found in response to almost all of the open-ended questions, our analysis focuses on the tags. Responses and tags were not broken down and analyzed by question because of this variation and because the tagging process alone effectively revealed themes in the responses.

## **Discussion**

Even though visiting the reference desk was a required course activity, not all students chose to participate. According to class records, only 56 of 85 (66%) students completed this assignment. This number is lower than the students' self-reported reference desk activity. According to the anonymous surveys, 65 out of 76 (86%) student respondents completed the assignment. (See Table 2.) There are two likely reasons for this discrepancy other than deliberation misinformation. Either some students did not fully understand the assignment and thought consulting with a librarian in the library instruction sessions completed the requirement, or the students did not indicate that they

were completing a class assignment at the time of the consultation at the reference desk and therefore did not get credit in the class records. Because of this discrepancy we cannot be sure all student comments refer only to the reference desk. Some students may just be reflecting on in-class consultations with the librarian. However, their comments are helpful in understanding the larger student perspective of consultations with reference librarians.

The surveys indicated that students who did not participate in a reference consultation felt they could research on their own, had no time, forgot about the assignment, or did not give the consultation assignment high priority. Students reported:

[I had] more important classes that needed my attention.

The help I received to search on the net during our workshops was enough to help me find what I needed (and, yes, those are scholarly sources).

A large portion, 66 (87%), reported that they would consult again with a librarian while 6 (8%) stated they would not. Four respondents (5%) did not respond to this question. Of the six who say they would not seek reference librarian help again, four of them said they would not do so because they felt confident in their own ability to locate information on their own in the future. This implies that they learned how to research well enough in library instruction sessions and from the reference desk interactions to believe they would be able to research without reference help in the future. While this response is overwhelmingly positive towards reference desk consultations, other issues brought out in the survey, which we discuss below, seem to gray this area.

Table 1 indicates how many responses were coded with each tag. The tagging process revealed nearly twenty common themes in respondents' remarks. Comments

indicate that most students found librarians' professional knowledge helpful and that they appreciated learning how to locate sources and find relevant information. In fact, these were the three most frequent tags: *locating sources*, *professional knowledge* and *relevancy* (see table). The popularity of these tags and many of the others is not unexpected. Librarians make use of professional knowledge to locate relevant sources for students and help them learn search skills. While the high frequency of these tags reveals positive conceptions of reference interactions and substantiate reference and instruction objectives, many other, slightly less common tags revealed more complex and occasionally less positive conceptions.

Twelve percent of respondents discussed critical thinking, indicating that some students were encouraged to think beyond merely finding the required number of resources for their persuasive papers. According to the tagging results, some of the concepts seem to be associated with one another. Many respondents who mentioned *critical thinking* also discussed *topics*. One logical explanation for this linkage might be that discussion of their paper topics in library instruction sessions led students to think more critically about the research process. In effect, the process of explaining a research question to a reference librarian results in a back and forth discussion that illustrates the importance of specifying search criteria in order to yield relevant results. This process can be an invaluable lesson in critical thought and precision. One student verbalized this in his/her response to the question, "What was the biggest challenge in doing your research?"

Trying to put in the exact words and reaching a conclusion on a lot of my research topics. I was always trying to look for a huge broad topic, but narrowing it down helped out a lot.

The beauty of this type of transaction is that it is often self-perpetuating; students are introduced to a skill they may not have known even existed and are now capable of practicing in future research-based projects.

A similar association seems to exist between the tags *keywords* and *different insight*. This seems to imply that students who appreciated the contributions of librarians' insights were also particularly impressed with librarians' skill at brainstorming different keywords or even the concept of keyword brainstorming. This also indicates that thinking about keywords helped students to realize and appreciate others' helpful points of view.

Several comments (13%) were tagged with *library anxiety*, indicating that these students felt overwhelmed by the library and hesitant to ask for help. Library anxiety was first explicitly identified by Melon in the 1980s [6]. In our survey, students appear to still suffer from this affliction. They worried that their questions were “dumb” or “stupid” and they “felt a little weird asking [them].” They described the library as “huge” and mysterious and the research process as “intimidating.” However, all *library anxiety* responses also indicated that working with librarians helped them overcome this anxiety. 80% of *library anxiety* respondents credited librarian's professional knowledge with making them feel more comfortable. These results signify the importance of personal interaction in reducing library anxiety and also further support the findings of Melon, who came to a similar conclusion in her seminal study [7]. Similarly, in his article, “Are Reference Desks Dying Out?” Scott Carlson also notes that the majority of students

prefer face-to-face interaction [8]. Hopefully, our reference desk consultation assignment will encourage students to establish a behavior pattern of seeking reference help that will continue through their college careers. However, even though all *library anxiety* respondents said they would consult with a librarian again, we cannot know whether these students have been able to get past their anxiety without library instruction. Would they ever approach the reference desk if it was not a class assignment or if their anxiety had not already been reduced in library instruction sessions?

A large portion of respondents mentioned time (33%). **RANGANATHAN'S 5 LAWS OF LIBRARY SCIENCE!!!!** Of the 25 comments tagged *time*, there were many variations that can be broken into three sub-tags: *saved time*, *no time* and *contradictory*. Most of these students (14 or 56% of the *time* comments) say that consulting with a librarian saves time, and all of the *saved time* students say they would consult with a librarian again. When asked why they would consult with a librarian in the future, *saved time* respondents commented:

Because i [sic] lose a lot of time researching for the wrong thing.

It would save me loads of time.

It saved me the hassel [sic] of trying to figure out where to get reliable information

However, *no time* respondents (9 or 36% of the *time* comments) expressed a concern that reference desk consultations take too much time; though 7 of these students say they would consult with a librarian in the future. They reason that if they had time, a consultation would be helpful. Many (5 out of 9) *no time* respondents said they did not complete the reference desk consultation assignment due to time constraints. One of the

*no time* respondents who did complete the assignment reported that the desk consultation “took time and [it] was somewhat difficult to explain the topic and what you wanted to find in a short amount of time.” Two students give *contradictory* statements. These students state that consulting with a librarian saves time, but they had no time to do so. One student says that working with a librarian in class “helped me to find sources quicker” but “I didn’t have time to do a consultation [at the reference desk].”

### **Conclusion**

While most of the informal survey results are highly positive, many larger questions were uncovered in the responses. Even with prior library instruction, students generally perceive value in reference desk consultations, and these consultations seem particularly helpful in decreasing library anxiety. Most students insist that they would consult with a librarian in the future. However, many students, even when they are required to do so, did not visit the desk. The survey results indicate that 14% of the students did not participate in the reference desk assignment while the class records set the non-participatory rate at 33%. This means that 14-33% of students in our classes did not visit the reference desk. Perhaps one reason for this is that students have contradictory conceptions of time and the reference desk.

Though many students seem to think the reference desk consultations saved them time, others claim that they had no time for the consultations. The latter group states that they are too busy and stressed to bother with a reference desk visit. Perhaps reference librarians are correct to experiment with service points and new ways of reaching out to students. However, the results of this exploratory study do not speak to how the reference desk should be configured or re-imagined; rather, they indicate that reference

consultations should be marketed to students as time savers. What if the root cause of students' resistance to visit the reference desk is not a matter of local or technological convenience, but the notion that librarians do not save students time? We posit that it is likely a mixture of both. Many of the students who came to the desk and who will come back in the future realize consultations with reference librarians save time. In addition, a common reason cited by students who did not visit the reference desk was lack of time. If we can convince students that consultations actually save them time, perhaps we can begin to reverse falling reference desk statistics. However, student conceptions of time in relation to the reference desk should be examined in a more in-depth study in order to better understand our exploratory survey results.

In the meantime, we will continue to require our students to visit the reference desk. This assignment helps calm library anxiety and makes many students realize that reference librarians can save them time in the research and writing process. It not only convinces most students of the value of reference consultations but also produces higher quality student research and consequently, better writing.

[1] Geoffrey Nunberg, "Teaching Students to Swim in the Online Sea," *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/13/weekinreview/13numb.html> (accessed Apr. 20, 2009).

[2] Karen Antell and Jie Huang, "Subject Searching Success: Transaction Logs, Patron Perceptions, and Implications for Library Instruction," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2008): 68-76.

[3] Martha Kyrillidou and Les Bland, "ARL Statistics: 2006-2007," <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/arlstat07.pdf> (accessed Apr. 20, 2009).

[4] Nunberg, "Teaching Students to Swim in the Online Sea."

[5] G.E. Gorman and Peter Clayton, *Qualitative Research for the Information Professional: A Practical Handbook* (London: Facet Publishing, 2005), 211.



[6] Constance A. Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," *College & Research Libraries* 47 (Mar. 1986): 160-165.

[7] *Ibid.*, 164.

[8] Scott Carlson, "Are Reference Desks Dying Out?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Apr. 20, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i33/33a03701.htm> (accessed Apr. 20, 2009).

**Table 1**

	<b>Class Records</b>	<b>Survey Results</b>
<b>Completed Reference Desk Consultation</b>	56 (66%)	65 (86%)
<b>Failed to Complete Reference Desk Consultation</b>	29 (33%)	11 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	85 (100%)	76 (100% of surveys; 89% of class enrollment)

**Table 2**

<b>Tag</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Responses</b>
<i>Locating sources</i>	35	46%
<i>Relevancy</i>	32	42%
<i>Professional knowledge</i>	27	36%
<i>Time</i>	25	33%
<i>Topic</i>	24	31%
<i>Resources</i>	19	25%
<i>Search skills</i>	17	22%
<i>Different insight</i>	13	17%
<i>Narrow search</i>	11	14%
<i>Information overload</i>	10	13%
<i>Library anxiety</i>	10	13%
<i>Keywords</i>	10	13%
<i>Critical thinking</i>	9	12%
<i>Databases</i>	8	10%
<i>On my own</i>	7	9%
<i>Website</i>	7	9%
<i>Scholarly/peer-reviewed sources</i>	6	8%
<i>Start</i>	5	7%
<i>Credibility</i>	5	7%
<i>Library instruction</i>	4	5%
<i>Motivation</i>	3	4%