

Effective Reference Interviews

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Detailed literature describing ideal reference interviews made me critique the librarians I encountered even more. The virtual reference librarian impressed me but still didn't ask the type of questions recommended by Kuhlthau, Dervin or Dewdney. I have never received the ideal service described in the various articles I reviewed, but I plan to provide it. If librarians are to become indispensable, information professionals do not have to start from scratch. They can and should consider existing research.

Kuhlthau describes 6 stages information seekers experience as they gather multiple opinions and thoughts. Musing over these allows seekers to develop their own conclusions. Kuhlthau advocates client-centered service concerned first with how each patron feels. She identifies different search phases and reminds librarians how these are each experienced. Confronting new information frequently causes uncertainty, confusion, frustration, and doubt.

Librarians must respond to this by being approachable, friendly and informative. Salt Lake City's public librarian was very approachable and friendly. The very modern but comfortable city gathering place is without high walls and counters. This arrangement encourages dialogue and exchange. Soft music plays in the background. Conversation, drinking, and even eating limited snacks is fine. The environment is informal and friendly and so is the staff. The library is a comfortable place to visit.

In contrast the library at the University of Utah is not a place Kuhlthau could recommend. It is not sensitive to anxiety patrons often feel as they enter the building. The 70s décor traps visitors in a time warp and the floors are furnished without semblance of order. It looks like an ugly warehouse, functional but not inviting. The art section is the

one small exception. Modern wooden tables adorn this small area. I am certain the art librarians had everything to do with how this section looks and thus feels. Even the reference desk there has counters lowered making the librarians seem open, friendly, and approachable.

The University of Utah general reference librarian kept himself in a closed fort-like center complete with high counters. When I ignored this almost-hostile barrier and ventured forth to talk to him he immediately tried to avoid providing me with any assistance by telling me another librarian would be in soon. Since I ignored this statement and kept standing there, he was obliged to help me. This is exactly what I wanted and his fort that probably scares patrons away, this time prevented him from avoiding the question.

He told me about exactly one database or Lexis-Nexis. He did not ask me if I knew how to access this or even show me how to get there on his computer. The University of Utah has over 500 databases and the sheer number makes them intimidating. I specifically said Lexis-Nexis was difficult to use to see if he'd offer assistance but he did not. Next I asked if he could recommend any other databases. He didn't offer me any. He said my topic was extremely narrow and current. He also told me the library wouldn't have books on the subject because it was so contemporary.

He did not ask me probing questions. Actually the University of Utah librarian didn't ask me questions at all. I did all the work to get him to speak and he seemed more concerned with leaving than anything else. The new librarian did not show up while I talked to the librarian and I spent over half an hour with him in conversation.

Conversation was not a problem for the associate librarian at the Salt Lake City Public Library. One thing gleaned from the 171 studies conducted by the Master's of Library and Information Science students later compiled by Dewdney and Ross in their "Flying a Light Aircraft: Reference Service Evaluation from a User's Viewpoint," is there are no cues to identify professional librarians. The only reason why I saw a difference is because I asked the man who was helping me if he was a librarian since he didn't direct me to any databases and the Google search he did was something I could have done at home.

He was very kind and friendly however and this made a huge difference although his ability to help me was limited. I'm pretty sure the man helping me at the University of Utah is a professional librarian because he immediately talked about databases. I had the feeling he could have helped me if he wanted to assist me.

I also submitted the same questions to two online reference sources the U.S.-based Internet Public Library and Ask a Librarian, a service from the UK. When I learned the Internet Public Library would take a few days to give me an answer, I looked for something immediate. The first service in the U.S. relies heavily on the question submitted. There is no opportunity to ask appropriate questions like Dervin's Neutral Questioning suggests. The interview would take even longer and it would not be worth it because of the time involved in answering email and then clarifying questions.

The problems I had with the Internet Public Library were specifically because I couldn't answer any questions and/or contribute once answers were given. One of the sources they provided me is a website I am very familiar with since my friend created and maintains it. If I was part of the discussion I could have ended the extensive information

shared about it. The librarian also mentioned an encyclopedia as a valuable source. It is definitely not something I am looking for or can use.

My question was very specific. I asked for information on how the royal family and namely the crown prince Tupouto'a and his sister princess Pilolevu are involved in developing the ICT in Tonga. Their development of Shoreline and TongaSAT are particular interests. The answers I received from the Internet Public Library were not helpful to me and I am not going to use any sources the service identified except the CIA site I already planned to use.

This was not a worthwhile experience for me. There is no comparison to the chance to offer feedback to a live librarian who then helps find what is needed. The librarian doesn't waste time or effort and neither does the patron. If I hadn't participated in an online "Ask a Librarian," session, I would not be convinced online reference is a vital development.

Everything is so convenient now. Patrons expect to do anything from home with a few mouse clicks. "Perceptions of Digital Reference," provides invaluable insight to mainly chat reference and how it is a natural and now crucial development that demands library school attention. The article proposes library schools include virtual reference in their curriculum.

I was so impressed with "Ask a Librarian." The first thing I liked was there was no mention of how difficult it was to find sources for my narrow topic. The asynchronous exchange allowed the librarian to ask questions and direct the search according to the answers I gave. The search results were thorough and given immediately. I am using everything the librarian directed me to examine. My Tongan friend who teaches at the

University of Utah and studies Tongan issues regularly, gave me a paper later that this online librarian already identified for me in this very helpful reference interview. The librarian helped me exactly as I wanted to be helped.

The co-web-browsing feature was especially good. I was provided with a printed transcript in my email account I could return to and research at my leisure. Smith's article captures the strength virtual reference work brings:

By aggressively and imaginatively repositioning ourselves to provide immediate, interactive point-of-need service to remote users – whether they are in or out of the library, whether the library is open or closed – we will not only be doing right by our clients, but we will also ensure the flourishing of a grand diversity in information services (1999).

If all services become as efficient as “Ask a Librarian,” visits to the physical library will decrease significantly. The librarian I dealt with was competent. He or she knew exactly where to look to help me find the answers I sought.

The need for competent librarians was pointed out by Gordon (2005). She wrote we need to stay ahead of the public in information retrieval to hold a competitive edge. She supports treating online clients with the same service in-person patrons enjoy. Since visual cues are gone, the librarian must employ even greater skill to discover true information needs and communicate effectively with patrons.

Although no librarian I communicated with had all the recommended traits proposed by various information professionals, the “Ask a Librarian,” person helped me exactly how I wanted. That was most helpful to me.

## References

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