

West Valley City Library:

Give Me Answers

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Abstract

Librarians are trained to help people locate information. An efficient search finds the most appropriate source in the least time. Theories abound about how this is done best. Effective communication is essential. Often patrons are unsure of exactly what they need. Librarians can help significantly. First the environment must be conducive to an information search. Librarians must be approachable. This includes everything from where and how high the reference desk is to eye contact and a smile. Librarians must be easy to find but depending on library traffic and the specific library, should venture often from the desk. They need to probe patrons to truly identify what is needed. I observed 4 different librarians who all work at the West Valley City Library. The level of service differed with each librarian but there were also challenges I didn't expect. I wouldn't have handled situations that rose exactly the same way but this difference is good. It is imperative that librarians hone their skills. They must be competent online. Google is a librarian's best friend, not his or her enemy. Librarians are responsible for telling patrons Google's limitations but should also laud its ease. Information professionals today must be the best Google searchers and still use and expose patrons to databases Pioneer provides along with the many other resources available to them. Library science is not exact. I learned what I want to be but I also saw what I never want to be like. Observing with library science theory to reflect on was particularly valuable.

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Salt Lake County operates two libraries in West Valley City's diverse community. I met and observed librarians at the West Valley City Public Library who answered questions as varied as the patrons. I heard Spanish and Vietnamese along with English, and noticed Pacific Islander and Caucasian individuals there too. Patrons were alone, with family, with friends, working at computer stations, reading and writing at tables, walking through aisles between shelves stacked with books, periodicals, and other media. Jacobsen and Sutton recognize the need to provide training to librarians who work with this amount of diversity. Without undermining training's benefit however, they maintain it is the specific relationship between librarian and patron that is paramount (281).

"This is a busy library," I thought, the Thursday evening I visited. I was told it is the "slow" night. A smiling librarian immediately asked if she could help me when I approached the desk. Another librarian was seated at the desk too. She never shifted her gaze from the computer screen in front of her. I was soon introduced to the computer-engrossed woman I learned is a substitute librarian.

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. Non-verbal body language can encourage or discourage an information seeker. Kuhlthau identifies different search phases and reminds librarians how these are each experienced. Confronting new information frequently causes uncertainty,

confusion, frustration, and doubt. We can limit this by being open, approachable, and friendly.

The body language of the substitute librarian was very standoffish. She looked like she didn't want to be bothered by anyone and had something extremely important happening on the computer screen that needed her full and undivided attention. The friendly librarian continued to smile and ask patrons if she could help. Another librarian acted as the enforcer. She remained cognizant of violations at all times and corrected patrons who committed offenses. Finally, the last librarian I observed ignored patrons until she was good and ready. Her skills were stellar when she used them. She just gave the impression patrons are beneath her, and her negative comments about them didn't help either.

Librarian students study human behavior and communication to learn to decipher what patrons really need. Students constantly try to gauge what is left unsaid. As librarians we cannot afford to be unapproachable or limit communication through negative body language. Murphy wrote, "librarians, like physicians, are required to understand aspects of personhood, personality, social, and psychological functioning in their interactions with clients (247)."

The desk is the first thing seen when entering the library. It is placed in line with the front doors and between two rows of public computer terminals. Terminals were filled to capacity the different days and times I observed. The reference desk is not labeled but it is obvious people at the desk work for the library and they are seated there to assist patrons. The reference desk is low and open. It encourages patrons to ask for help. The design is wonderful because even timid librarians are approached and must talk

to the public. Librarians cannot hide from patrons and these information professionals are always in full view.

I sat at the desk with the reference librarians. Most of them were warm and friendly. The substitute librarian barely acknowledged my existence. I did this first on a Thursday evening and watched the substitute librarian leave and a regular librarian take her place. I saw a couple of people I know from downtown Salt Lake City. They were there for a non-profit organization meeting. They wanted to know where the auditorium was in the building which is where their meeting was held.

I visited the next day on a Friday afternoon. The librarians told me this was their busiest day and I wanted to see it. I was pleasantly surprised to see the substitute librarian in the middle of a “reader’s advisory.” She walked with the woman to the books and didn’t just recommend titles. I never saw anything positive about her until this moment. As the substitute completed her meeting with the patron, the friendly librarian brought a couple more books. I did not like this although I’m sure she meant to help. Her assistance however undermined the substitute’s work. The substitute did not need additional materials. We need to treat our co-workers with respect. Patrons can sense our attitudes. The substitute didn’t appear offended by the extra help but I wouldn’t appreciate it or do the same thing to anyone else.

The non-English speaking custodian however needed assistance. The librarian I think has a superiority complex spoke to the custodian in fluent Spanish. She was also the librarian consulted repeatedly with computer questions. She is a highly skilled asset. She is amazing but I just wish she had a different attitude. I didn’t like that she failed to acknowledge patrons who waited patiently for her to be done with a phone call. I wanted

her to pause and tell the person she'd be just a few more minutes. She didn't crack a smile either. She didn't ask anyone if they needed help. She did not take initiative but waited for people to approach her.

I tried to hide behind a pole to avoid answering questions. This worked when there was a librarian free. For the most part it did not work. The desk is open on all sides and people approach from all directions. The kids and young adults tried to talk to me first. That might be because I was the youngest person seated behind the desk. Sometimes when the other librarians were busy, I helped people as much as I could.

A young Vietnamese girl translated for her father. I was able to help them put a book on hold after asking him for his library card. The friendly librarian helped at the end and made sure it was done correctly. I also helped a patron find Charles Dickens books. She was searching in the nonfiction section and was trying to remember the shelf where she saw these books. Dickens was easy to find as his books were on the shelf directly in front of the reference desk.

The woman told me she checked out a large hardcover Dickens novel and she wanted to see if it was in paperback. The patron was not apprehensive at all. I warned her by telling her I was just there to observe for a class but that I'd help her if I could. She was pleased with the result and so was I. The librarians were busy helping other patrons. One helped someone print legal papers from an online site. The other librarian was with a patron looking for an item on the shelves.

Although I am sure the woman I helped was pleased, I know one man was not. He walked in carrying a laptop and asked if connecting to the internet was the same there as it is downtown. A librarian went to help him set up his wireless internet connection.

He was not able to connect so he just left. Since I have a wireless laptop I know how easy it is to connect to Salt Lake City Library's wireless service. To connect to Salt Lake County Library's wireless service took me 3 trips to the library, two that ended in frustration. I tried to get help from librarians as well but they didn't know how to help me. I persisted because my internet connection wasn't working at home. If it was working at home I would've quit. I had to change my computer settings to finally get it to work. Curry states only 55% of library users are satisfied patrons. With the exception of this man however I felt all the patrons who sought help were satisfied.

Patron satisfaction has everything to do with librarian performance. I watched 4 different librarians. One was particularly friendly. She is the type of librarian I hope to become. Another librarian didn't seem to care about the patrons at all. People had to approach her. One of the librarians made derogatory remarks about the patrons. I didn't like this at all. Although the statements were made to other staff and to me, I still didn't like hearing them. After listening to her patron complaints I told her these are the type of people who need the library the most. I can understand her feelings a little. West Valley City librarians do their fair share of "policing."

Asking patrons to turn off cell phones was the most common request I watched librarians make repeatedly to different people. One patron sitting at a computer terminal specifically asked a librarian to tell the teenage girl sitting next to her to turn off her phone. Librarians also had to tell kids not to run in the library. This was done twice.

Quite a few students visit the library. A free phone at the rear of the reference desk was used by what looked like a group of junior high school students. The students spoke loudly and laughed loudly too. They were disruptive. I listened for the "Where's

the bathroom?” question I expected but no one asked. Patrons were comfortable there and seemed to be repeat library users. I wouldn't be surprised to learn they visit the library daily.

I can only imagine how tireless it can be to constantly remind people to refrain from something every day. I'm sure it is easy to get jaded. I'm sure I'll want to complain too sometimes but if I'm going to spend 8 hours a day somewhere, I'm going to enjoy it or leave. People are so interesting and so much fun. West Valley City Library enjoys so many different patrons. What a privilege it must be to work there. It doesn't sound like there are many dull moments.

A dull library is not where patrons want to be either. Jo Bell Whitlatch called for developing marketing skills to run effective outreach programs (216). I'm not sure what type of marketing or outreach programs West Valley City library is doing or even if they're doing any but they are successful. The large number and diversity of patrons is a testament to this. The library is well-used by the community it serves. Patrons like being there and patrons return there.

I'm glad we were given this assignment. It has a very practical application to work I will perform as a librarian. I agree with Allen who wrote evaluation is something that should be done if professionals are concerned with the service they provide (246). I like the variety a librarian enjoys. No two days are the same. To remain competent evaluation must be recurring. Change based on the results needs to be implemented.,

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