Analysis of a Reference Desk Observation Session
at a Community College Library

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In a world today flush with a plethora of information in a variety of media types, patrons can benefit greatly from the services of reference librarians. The art of providing exemplary reference services goes beyond simply finding the “right answer” for a patron. As stated in the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, “…the success of the transaction is measured not only by the information conveyed, but also by the positive or negative impact of the patron/staff interaction” (Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), 2004). Therefore, in order to best serve patrons, reference librarians not only need to be well trained in the art of searching and locating the desired information, but must also learn the art of courtesy, interest, and helpfulness. The Reference and User Services Association set forth guidelines which are intended to be used in the training, development, and/or evaluation of library professionals and staff. As part of a training exercise in a master’s of library and information studies reference course, students were asked to complete an observation of interactions at a library reference desk and evaluate the experience based upon the RUSA guidelines. The findings of this observation exercise are presented below.

A three-hour observation was undertaken at the reference desk at the Central Campus Library of Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) in Charlotte, North Carolina. The observation was conducted on Friday, September 4, 2009 from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM during the third week of the fall semester. Current enrollment at CPCC is over 19,500 with students attending any one of six campuses across the Charlotte area (CPCC Office of Community Relations Communicator on behalf of the President’s Office, personal communication, September 11, 2009). CPCC has a diverse student population representing over 161 countries. Approximately 40% of CPCC students take college credit classes; 40% take job enhancement and certification classes; and 20% take literacy, adult high school, and English as a Second
Language classes (Central Piedmont Community College). All of the students and the more than 2,100 faculty and staff have access to the CPCC libraries and their services. According to statistics, the gate count in this library branch during September 2008 totaled 40,788 (Kushmaul, 2009, p. 5). Based upon this count, one can expect similar foot traffic within the library in September 2009.

The reference desk at the CPCC Central Campus Library is located on the main floor of the library in the back side of the building. The desk is staffed by a librarian during all library operating hours, which are posted near the front entrance of the building. The reference desk has two librarian work-stations arranged facing toward 40 student computer terminals. At the time of this observation, two reference librarians were present at the reference desk. During quieter times in the library, one librarian is scheduled at the reference desk. Each librarian workstation is set up with a computer terminal. One workstation is angled in a way such that the librarian faces more towards the wall than the students or flow of foot traffic. To the left of this workstation is a collection of ready reference materials. The other librarian workstation is angled towards the foot traffic of the library and is more visually in line with the student computer workstations. The student computer workstations are arranged so that the screens face the reference desk. This
arrangement has been purposefully designed to discourage inappropriate student use of computers. There is a Reference sign on the wall to the right of the reference desk, a non-prominent location. (The reference area has been recently rearranged and the signage change has reportedly not yet been completed.) The reference book shelves are located around the corner from the reference desk, slightly out of the direct line of sight from the librarians.

During the three hour observation period, there were 16 reference interactions. Over 60% of these interactions (10) related to computer and printing access and basic software support. Three interactions were directional in nature. One interaction related to a student seeking information about tickets for a campus event. Finally, there were two extended reference interactions. The librarians indicated that as the semester progresses, the number of extended reference interactions increases while computer access questions decrease.

With regards to the RUSA guideline 1.0 concerning approachability, overall the reference librarians appeared to be very approachable. However, the location of the reference desk in the back of the library and signage placement may be barriers to approachability. Further, the positioning of the reference librarian workstation which is angled toward the wall may also be an impediment to approachability. Apart from the physical location and arrangement of the reference desk, the librarians themselves were very poised and ready to engage approaching patrons. While the librarians both tended to browse their computers during down times, each was always aware of approaching patrons and readily directed their attention to them. When approached, each librarian turned their body toward the patron, smiled, made eye contact and typically greeted each patron with a friendly comment such as, “May I help you?”

During the three hour observation window, one of the librarians got up and “roved” the reference
area twice to make sure everyone was getting his or her needs met. Overall, both reference librarians were friendly, courteous and approachable.

According to the second RUSA guideline, successful librarians must demonstrate a high level of interest in the reference transaction. The CPCC reference librarians did, indeed, demonstrate their interest in the patrons’ informational needs by immediately putting their personal work aside and facing the patron when speaking and listening. It was apparent during the reference transactions, particularly with extended reference, that the librarians were interested in their patrons, demonstrated by asking further questions, nodding their heads, and further discussing the topic. While the majority of the questions were technically related and resolved with a quick response, the librarians maintained a polite and willing attitude regardless of the extent of patron need.

As stated in RUSA guideline 3 as it relates to listening and inquiring, “The librarian must be effective in identifying the patron’s information needs and do so in a manner that keeps the patron at ease” (RUSA). There were two interactions during the observation period which provided an opportunity to observe in-depth reference interviews. In this first reference interaction, a student approached the reference desk asking for help finding a book about the “economic impact of Charlotte going green.” The librarian encouraged further discussion about the topic by asking questions relating to the nature of the project, the type of resources being sought, and rephrased the question to make sure she understood the student’s request. The librarian allowed the student to fully articulate her question before launching into a search. The second in-depth reference interview involved a student’s approach of the reference desk and his question, “Is Blackboard the only way to get to the library archives?” By asking several clarifying and open ended questions, the librarian was able to ascertain that the student wanted to
locate books that he could checkout from the library for a project on affirmative action. Again, the librarian was receptive, encouraging, and cordial. She used this opportunity as a teaching moment to show the student how to access the library’s catalog, search for a topic, and locate books currently available in the Central Library. Regardless of the depth of question, the librarians did a fine job of allowing student patrons to fully express their information needs before responding. Each patron was treated cordially by the librarians.

The next step in the reference process, *searching*, is where the behavior of the librarian and accuracy of searching strategies come together to yield desired information for the patron. As noted above, of the 16 reference transactions observed, only two required actual searching. In the first student inquiry regarding the “economic impact of Charlotte going green,” the librarian invited the student to view the computer screen with her as they worked together to conduct the search, collaboratively identifying search terms and potential sources. The patron desired a book rather than an article. Unfortunately, the search came up short and the student left empty-handed. In hindsight, the student may have benefitted from further conversation with the librarian that due to the currency of the topic, more relevant information may have been found through searching newspapers and journals rather than seeking a book. Instead, the librarian suggested to the student that she may have better luck at the public library. The second in-depth reference interaction yielded more satisfactory results. Through guidance by the librarian, the student was able to learn about using the library catalog, narrowing searches using subject keywords, locating books on the shelves, and ultimately found several relevant books for his topic. The librarian assisted the student his initial search and then left him to browse through the information on his own with direction to come back for assistance if necessary.
The final stage of the reference transaction, *follow-up*, is one in which the librarian should determine if the patron is satisfied with the results of the search and refer the patron to other sources if necessary. During this reference desk observation, follow-up was provided in half of the extended reference interactions. For example, in the situation in which the student was looking for a book on the “economic impact of Charlotte going green,” the librarian basically ended the transaction with a comment implying there wasn’t any information to be found at CPCC and suggested visiting the public library. Rather than send this student blindly to the public library, the reference librarian instead may have counseled her on different types of sources available through the CPCC library, phoning ahead to the public library to ensure the patron would have better luck finding relevant information, and inviting her to come back if she would like further assistance. In the second extended reference situation, the librarian provided suitable follow-up by inviting the student to come back if he needed further assistance. However, rather than simply “pointing the way” to where the books are physically located, the librarian may have better served this student by escorting him to the shelves (on a different floor of the library) and demonstrating how to locate books using call numbers.

In summary, the RUSA guidelines provide valuable direction for reference librarians in executing successful transactions. Conducting a reference desk observation and evaluating the interactions according to the RUSA guidelines was a useful exercise for learning how reference work in the “real world” is conducted. While the reference transactions may not have been carried out in a completely perfect manner according to the RUSA guidelines, the librarians were overall very approachable, showed interest, demonstrated good listening/inquiry skills, and were efficient in their search strategies. Librarians must remember that the reference interaction is not complete when the “right answer” is found, but must also strive to provide thorough follow-up.
References

Central Piedmont Community College. (n.d.) *CPCC offers opportunities for everyone (#3207) [Brochure].* Charlotte: CPCC.
