THE CRISIS IN REFERENCE SERVICE: A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

By: Mark Schumacher

***Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document

Hernon and McClure make a number of important points in the lead article of the symposium on "Library Reference Service: an Unrecognized Crisis." It is certainly true, for instance, that reference departments should be able to answer more than 55% of the factual questions asked at the reference desk; reference librarians "clearly• should not simply say "I don't know" and go on about their business, leaving the patron to fend for him/herself. And they "surely• should not display "abrasive behavior" to patrons. Having said that, it seems that there remains, from their statements, a certain image of current reference practice which needs to be nuanced a bit, and which in fact the respondents begin to touch upon in their pieces, by placing the results of unobtrusive testing at the reference desk in a broader context. We can see in fact that the questions raised by Hernon and McClure lead to reflections on a number of major issues of public services librarianship: the relationship between public and technical services, patterns of reference desk staffing, the role of library education, and the ongoing crises in funding for public services. I would like to respond to the comments of the various symposium participants by presenting a "view from the trenches," the perspective of a reference librarian who works at the desk twelve to twenty hours a week, encountering the challenges, the frustrations, but also the exhilaration and rewards which that position provides.

THE QUESTIONS, AND AN ATTITUDE

As Thomas Childers points out, and as others allude to, the short, factual, unambiguous reference question, while it does occur regularly, does not constitute the bulk of reference encounters. I work in a centralized reference department of a medium-sized public university library. A question as esoteric as the bituminous coal production in the U.S. in 1868 occurs at most a few times a month. The most frequently asked "factual" questions, beyond directions to the reserve room, the pencil sharpener, and the bathroom (all of which I answer with 100% accuracy!), concern the computerized serials list containing information about our 6500 current serial holdings and other previously received titles. In the rare instances I cannot satisfactorily explain the particular entry in question, I either take or send the patron to the serials department for further clarification. (If indeed there is a problem with the printout, I leave a note for my colleague in charge of maintaining the list.) The more typical reference encounter, however, begins with a vaguely-worded request for help finding a) articles on a topic for a speech, b) the best index to look up information on, e.g., sign language, or c) the quickest way to get books on, e.g., terrorism. These requests usually require skills other than fact provision: question interpretation and negotiation, instruction in use of reference materials, as well as simple direction-giving.

These patrons need to be introduced to the research process (by which information can be extracted from the vast resources of the library) rather than be given a product/artifact. And once we have launched them on their quest for the materials/sources/information they need, it becomes a simple and effective technique to say to them, as I try to do each time I leave a patron to consult a reference work, "If you need more help, or if that isn't quite right, just stop back and we'll look some more." A manager of reference services who instills in his/her staff the attitude that a reference interview is not necessarily over just because the patron has been handed a

reference book has done more to improve the quality of reference service in his/her unit than all the "theoretical" discussions of organizational structure, goals and mission, work attitudes, and "priorities.

A PHILOSOPHY OF INTERDEPENDENCE, AND A COMMITMENT

In one of his movies, Clint Eastwood, as "Dirty Harry", tells a villain (who is about to blow himself up), "a man's gotta know his limitations." Although we are not in such desperate straits, it is a thought which all reference staff should keep in mind when serving at the reference desk or otherwise answering patron queries. I don't consider it a sign of incompetence to admit that a colleague may be able to locate the optimal source for a particular query faster than I. As Bill Miller points out, no matter how advanced our academic preparation or how extensive our experience, we cannot transform ourselves into experts in all subject areas. It behooves us to make use of our peers' expertise. In academic contexts, this circle of peers should extend not only to other reference librarians, but to anyone on the staff better able to solve the patron's problem. For instance, I regularly ask our serials cataloger for help tracking down particularly difficult citations on OCLC (usually proceedings); she invariably turns them up. In fact, teaching faculty can also be called upon as resources, either for language skills or other in-depth knowledge. This philosophy of interdependence should serve as the basis for any reference desk staffing decisions made by library administrators. As long as the library staff member, professional or otherwise, who encounters the library patron knows that there are colleagues he/she can (and should) turn to, if necessary, for assistance in finding the required information, the "status" of the information provider becomes immaterial. His/her sense of interdependence should improve the level of reference service by allowing him/her to access the knowledge of all the library staff. More than a concern with organizational or structural readjustments, it is, again, a service orientation which must be ingrained in public service librarians in order to promote reference excellence. Although, as Bill Miller indicates, there are no doubt reference librarians with varying levels of competence and/or intelligence, I believe that they all do share a common characteristic: a desire to help people find information, or more generally, an interest in problem-solving. That interest brought them to reference librarianship. (It certainly wasn't the money, or the prestige!) Evelyn Daniel is correct in seeing that spark in her reference students; I feel that it is still there in nearly all the reference librarians I have met.

THE BROADER VIEW

Frustrations remain. How much time can you give to a member of the general public or to students of another institution, when you know your own students are waiting at the reference desk? After sitting in a (possibly boring) meeting for two hours, how much vivacity and energy can you bring to your shift on the desk? How much effort can you give to a phone reference question, probably from a non-university patron, while trying to prepare a bibliographic instruction lecturer for 150 accounting students? (A lecture designed, of course, to reduce the work load at the reference desk.) BI projects and computer search interviews, service on university or library committees, growing pressures to do research and to publish: attention to all these time-consuming tasks can reduce an individual's ability to perform optimally at the reference desk. These duties, necessary facets of academic librarianship today, explain in part, "but do not excuse" the incorrect or incomplete responses to the questions asked using unobtrusive testing. Thus, although provision of answers to factual questions is in fact a small part of our daily work responsibilities, it should be given as much of our attention as our other, "grander" projects. Reference desk service is, after all, the basis of our mandate, helping the library's patrons as they come to us. Threats to the excellence of that service are manifold: time constraints, understaffing, evolving technology (and the need to understand it), even difficult patrons. To combat them, library administrators, and reference managers in particular, need to create the most supportive atmosphere possible for their staffs, allowing, for instance, librarians to pursue a variety of tasks that interest and stimulate them. A mix of activities is one way to give librarians a fresh, and hopefully upbeat, attitude toward each patron, and the energy to follow each question through to its (complete) resolution. P.S. One could of course expound at much greater length on many of the questions raised in the symposium. Let me end by suggesting one possible positive result of this discussion: perhaps we will treat "every" question at the reference desk as

though it were part of an unobtrusive testing research project. Then we would always make sure that our library scored better than 55%!