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## Reforming or Rejecting the Reference Desk: Conflict and Continuity in the Concept of Reference

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## **Reforming or Rejecting the Reference Desk: Conflict and Continuity in the Concept of Reference**

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### **Introduction**

At the 2007 ACRL National Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, perhaps no session generated more heated debate than one titled “The Reference Question—Where Has Reference Been? Where Is Reference Going?” The presenters—James Rettig, Jerry Campbell, William Miller, and Brian Mathews—offered their thoughts on reference, and then engaged the audience in a lively discussion. The presenters asked very pointed questions about the viability of “traditional” reference service based at the reference desk, particularly in an increasingly digital world. Several members of the audience spoke up to challenge the panel's perspectives and affirm the value of face-to-face, desk-based services. Carlson (2007) described the session as a clash between two competing visions of reference services. One vision of reference asserts that the era of the reference desk has ended, and that reference services need to be online or else risk being left behind. The other perspective champions face-to-face service, centered on the reference desk, and how it remains a key component of reference service, even in the 21st century.

This article seeks to challenge the assertion that there are two camps with diametrically opposed views of reference, and trace the history of this discussion through the examination of the published literature. Although a number of articles over the years have identified themselves as anti- or pro-reference desk, a careful analysis of the literature reveals that many articles affirm the value of human-mediated reference that the earliest description of the reference ideal put forth. The key differences that can be seen in the literature center on the methods of reference service delivery, rather than on dramatically different ideas of what reference should be. Only three of the anti-reference desk articles cited here actually attempt to challenge the value of human interaction, and these will be examined in greater detail. This paper begins with a description of the origins of the traditional vision of reference, and then seeks to describe the origins of the current debate, which can be found in the reference reform movement. Through an analysis of the articles that emerged from the reference reform period, this paper demonstrates how much these pro- and anti-reference desk articles actually agree in their vision of reference, even as their methods for carrying it out may be somewhat different. Finally, the articles that critique the idea of human-mediated reference can be examined more closely, with special attention to the alternatives that they present.

### **Traditional Vision of Reference**

No more complete definition of the concept of “traditional” reference can be found than the one in Samuel Green's work “Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers” from 1876. Green began his famous work with a seemingly contemporary account of what has come to be called library anxiety. He

explained that many patrons entering a library will experience a certain degree of anxiety, and that librarians need to coax them to “say freely what they want” (p. 74). Green went on to give a variety of examples of the types of questions that a librarian working with patrons might encounter, and then he began to discuss the four key benefits that should result from librarians interacting with the public. The first that he listed is effective recommendation of resources, which stems from the cultivation of approachability by the librarian. The second is the librarian’s ability to use reference questions to inform collection development. The effective marketing of the library to the community is the third element that emerges from interacting with patrons. Finally, the librarian has opportunities to improve the reading preferences of their patrons. In addition, he described traits that he considered vital for librarians interacting with the public, such as diligence and persistence in addressing patron questions. He encouraged librarians to embrace personalized customer service. Green admonished his fellow librarians to “Respect reticence,” while being careful “not to make inquirers dependent” (p. 80).

Green’s 1876 article provides a vision of reference service that allows modern librarians to distill a comprehensive service mission from it. By examining Green’s original statements, made in the context of a computer-less world and without the infrastructure of modern communications technology, it is possible to see just how pertinent his suggestions and conclusions remain, because they go beyond the methodology. His descriptive portrait of successful reference is not bound by any particular methods, but instead transcends modes of service delivery. The key component that he assumes in this vision of reference is that human-to-human interaction is a strength of reference, and that has been a defining factor in reference services throughout the years that followed the publication of Green’s work.

## Historical Context

In just over one hundred years after the publication of Green’s foundational statement of what reference should look like, the library and the world around it had changed dramatically. Throughout that time, reference librarians questioned and examined their work and the services they provide, reaching conclusions that have been beneficial for the profession and library users (Palmer, 1999). However, as Carlin (2007) has noted, the increased pace of technological change and the accompanying changes in user expectations beginning in the 1980s ushered in another line of self-analysis, with librarians more openly critiquing and questioning time-honored modes of service. An early contribution to this strand of critical literature was Miller’s 1984 article “What’s Wrong with Reference?” It suggested that reference services were in need of review, emphasizing the diminishing quality and effectiveness of reference as librarians became victims of their own success. Even as demand for reference services increased, librarians began developing new services and looking for ways to market them. In Miller’s assessment, the long-standing strengths in what he termed “traditional services” were in decline as new services were added and the burdens of these new services on librarians were not recognized. As Carlin (2007) has observed, this work became the catalyst for numerous studies and discussions about how to change reference for the better, or what Tyckoson (1999) termed the “reference-reform movement” (p. 57).

From these reform efforts came a variety of perspectives on how reference service should be reconfigured. Many of the reform articles made a direct declaration either in favor of or against the reference desk itself, lending credence to the idea that there really are two separate visions of reference that stand in opposition. However, upon closer examination it becomes evident that almost all of these articles attempt to address the question of the reference desk in terms of reference methodology. From this review of the literature, the compatibility of many of these reform recommendations with Green’s original vision becomes clear. A few of those articles that critique the idea of the reference desk put forth a competing vision of reference that challenges the traditional notion, and this will be addressed as well.

## Eliminating the Reference Desk

One of the broad perspectives that emerged from this period of “reference reform” was that of eliminating the reference desk. A number of articles boldly proclaimed some version of the idea that “traditional” reference services had become obsolete. In most of these articles, the definition of traditional

reference services was implied rather than overtly stated. This can lead to a lack of clarity as to exactly what they are critiquing. However, looking at how each article addressed the issue of the reference desk will provide more clarity as to how each article contributes to the debate.

Ford presented one of the earliest articles to recommend doing away with desk-based reference in 1986. Ford examined the discussion about the future of libraries and reference services and found that the centrality of the reference desk was simply assumed, and not adequately questioned. Ford made it clear that she was not arguing that patrons no longer needed help, but was instead questioning whether the reference desk was the most effective or efficient means to provide that help. She concluded by suggesting that computer technology might be able to provide answers to frequently asked questions, freeing librarians to deal with more difficult questions during scheduled office time, rather than from the desk. She upheld the idea that “direct personal assistance” was the hallmark of reference librarianship, but that did not necessarily imply the exclusive use of the reference desk and could incorporate other methods of service delivery as well (p. 491-94).

Hallman (1990) emphasized the technological change that was taking place as a rationale for re-evaluating desk-based service. Hallman maintained the idea that reference librarians should learn about and be able to instruct others in the use of information technology. However, he also argued that the organizational structure and work flows in the library must change to adapt to and incorporate new tools. In Hallman's estimation, the new packaging of information created the need for a new skill set and new methods for reference librarians. Like Ford (1986), he questioned whether the traditional reference desk really provided the librarian with the adequate time and setting to provide answers to complex questions.

Campbell's 1992 article took these themes of technology and efficiency and applied them in a way that re-evaluated how face-to-face reference interactions should be handled, posing a more direct challenge to Green's original vision. Campbell asserted that his goal was to “refocus our mission and change what librarians do” (p. 31). He went on to explain this change as encompassing a radical transfer of information to users via electronic means and a move away from centralized information storage toward more decentralized and disintermediated access. Campbell proposed renaming reference librarians “access engineers,” with 3 key duties: to help users understand information sources, to understand their users' needs, and to find innovative ways to deliver information to the user. This vision of the librarian as an access engineer involved fielding the bulk of questions that come to the reference desk via computer and without human mediation.

Another article that promoted the idea of reference service without the traditional reference desk is Massey-Burzio's well-known 1992 article describing what has come to be known as the “Brandeis model.” The author declared that “In March 1990, the Main Library at Brandeis University eliminated the reference desk entirely...” (p. 277). In this article, the author asserted that traditional reference service, defined as having a librarian available to answer any question, is really only designed to handle quickly-answered questions. In this context, in-depth research questions are not given adequate time because of the volume of questions that must be addressed. In the Brandeis model, Massey-Burzio described how the reference desk was removed and replaced by a quick-answer information desk and a “research consultation” office where librarians were available by referral from the information desk.

Summerhill echoed Ford's (1986) concerns about the economic efficiency and effectiveness of the reference desk model in her 1994 article, “The High Cost of Reference.” By adopting a business perspective, Summerhill took a hard look at the cost-effectiveness of reference services provided through a desk-centered model. She highlighted the significant amount of time that librarians working at a traditional reference desk spend doing tasks other than assisting patrons and concluded that this model is inefficient. She proposed a model for providing reference service by appointment and from the office, not the reference desk.

In a provocative statement from their 1995 article, Ewing and Hauptman claimed to “...take the position that traditional academic reference service, until now held to be a key element within higher

education, does not need to be rethought or reconfigured, it needs to be eliminated” (p. 3). In an effort to challenge assumptions about reference service in general, they offered a range of options regarding reference for libraries moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These options included maintaining traditional reference services based at the desk, pursuing a more disintermediated technology-centric version of reference, adopting a tiered model of reference, or doing away with reference services altogether. Although not going so far as to recommend a solution, they did emphasize the need for reference librarians to address the decline of human-mediated information services and the rise of technological alternatives.

Lewis (1995) responded to Ewing and Hauptman's (1995) assertions by stating that “...traditional reference service is already dead” (p. 10). By traditional reference service, Lewis meant the librarian who knew the library's print collection intimately and could spend significant time helping individual patrons. He juxtaposed this idea of traditional reference, based on a print collection, with the concept of the electronic library, with remote, computer-mediated access for users. He concluded by exhorting his colleagues to pursue success in the transition toward an electronic library, with increased emphasis on instruction of patrons by librarians as a more efficient means of helping users than one-on-one instruction at the desk. Although Lewis emphasized the importance of computer-mediated access to information, he still recognized the need for human interaction in the form of library instruction.

In 1999, Campbell again exhorted his colleagues in reference to change their view of their work in a conference address published the next year in *Reference and User Services Quarterly*. In his estimation, the situation for reference had become even more dire as statistics showed that reference encounters continued to end in wrong answers and desk statistics declined. In addition, the face-to-face paradigm in higher education began to decline as asynchronous, web-based learning began to be more common and business models infiltrated higher education. In this context, Campbell saw changes that threatened to leave reference librarians who remained entrenched in face-to-face, desk-based interaction forever behind and on the fast track to irrelevance.

Lipow (2003) began her article by stating that the reference desk “was never a good idea” (p. 31). She described this type of service as being there “just in case,” and contrasted it with “point-of-need reference service” that provides help to patrons where they are, not simply for those who search it out. In her vision of the library in 2020, she saw the library's web presence augmented by email and chat reference technology that provide, in essence, a tiered service model both in person and online. Through the use of these new technologies, she foresaw greater opportunities for libraries to collaborate on reference questions and handle routine questions through information desks and automated systems, with the option to refer patrons both in person and virtually by using online communications technologies.

Reviewing the arguments from these articles, it is clear that most of them do not reject the idea of human-mediated reference. For example, Ford (1986), Massey-Burzio (1992), Summerhill (1994), and Lipow (2003) all champion the role of the reference librarian in face-to-face or virtual contexts, emphasizing the need to reorganize librarian-mediated reference services to be better able to answer complex questions. Hallman (1990) also acknowledged the limitations of desk-based service for answering complex questions. Each of these articles asserted that librarians needed more time to work with difficult reference questions, and that new organizational structures were needed to supply this time. Lewis (1995) continued to see a role for the reference librarian in the electronic library, but in an expanded instruction role in order to more efficiently teach users about library resources. Articles by Ford (1986), Campbell (1992 and 2000), Ewing and Hauptman (1995), and Lewis (1995) placed greater emphasis on the potential for computer-mediated reference service to provide a new methodology to address quick-answer and repetitive questions. In this sense, each of these articles rejected the reference desk as an outmoded method of service delivery.

The overarching focus of almost all these self-proclaimed “anti-desk” articles was that the methods of reference service must change. However, Campbell's 1992 and 2000 articles and Ewing and Hauptman's 1995 article go a step beyond and ask the question of whether computer-mediated reference

service can provide more than a new methodology. They also voice the challenging perspective that human-mediated reference is the problem. This argument goes beyond discussions of methodology and actually calls into question the underlying assumptions about the value of human-to-human interaction in reference service. These articles stand as the greatest challenge to Green's traditional view of reference, predicated on the importance of human interaction. Before addressing that challenge, it is important to examine the "other side" of the purported dichotomy and see how these perspectives relate.

## Championing the Desk

At the same time that the preceding articles were entering the discussion, a number of other articles were offering a different take on the issue, asserting that it was the way that reference desk service was implemented that caused difficulties for both librarians and patrons. These articles reject the notion of eliminating the desk, and instead provide various proposals for how to improve service at the reference desk.

In 1985, Biggs wrote an early article that attempted to address the problems that Miller described with reference service, without eliminating desk service. Biggs argued that no other profession is so focused on providing service at any time of day, and, in fact, only fast-food and automated banking services aspire to those hours. Instead of the desk itself being a problem, the focus on providing service quantity was the problem. Biggs suggested scheduling fewer hours at the reference desk for librarians, allowing them more time to seek innovative solutions to problems. She also suggested that "traditional" reference services could be provided at peak hours, with librarians available by appointment to handle more in-depth patron questions.

Shapiro's 1987 article, titled "Trying to Fix 'What's Wrong with Reference'" functioned as a response to the problems described by Miller (1984) at the reference desk. By reorganizing the physical placement of the various reference and information desks within the library, Shapiro reported how a reference department could transition to a tiered service model. Library administration placed desks designed to provide quick answers to factual and directional questions in high-traffic areas. At the same time they created a separate area in the library for subject-specific help and referrals. Staff and student workers were included in answering directional and frequently-asked questions.

Asserting that Green's (1876) original vision of reference is still a valid aspiration for librarians, Berger's 1996 article addressed the social changes that have affected reference service. Berger suggested that as information becomes more important in the economy, the reference librarian will still be important. He or she will not connect patrons with information as before, but will instead connect patrons to multiple sources that they can use to create their own content. In addition, the reference librarian will find a new task in teaching patrons how to access the information they seek using the technological tools available to them. Berger concluded his article by stating that the librarian-patron interaction should not be abandoned, especially not in the context of the "Information Age," where libraries are even more important than ever.

Looking at the economic, technological, and demographic changes that public libraries in particular would face in the future, Low (1996) concluded that the role of the reference librarian would remain unchanged. She stated that "In its simplest form, our role is to help people find the information that they seek" (p. 146). Although the changes that she described would impact how that role is fulfilled, she concluded that this fundamental task of the reference librarian would remain the same. Although not directly addressing the question of the desk, Low did assert that the fundamental concept of reference service should be carried forward.

Tyckoson (1997) began by looking at the origins of reference services in the late 19th Century, tracing them to the moment of confluence of public education and public libraries, which created a need for training and orienting new library users. He specifically cited Samuel Green's presentation and paper

from 1876. Tyckoson then attempted to address whether or not Green's key principles of reference still apply to the realm of libraries, which has changed so much since 1876. He concluded that Green's principles remain at least as vital to reference as in the past, if they have not become even more important in our day and age. Since many of the social factors that prompted the delineation of those four principles remain in effect today, Tyckoson argued that Green's vision remains a cornerstone of reference itself.

In a 1999 article, Tyckoson again weighed in on this issue, revisiting Miller's 1984 critique of reference. He clarified Miller's point that reference librarians have become victims of their own success, creating a demand that they do not have the resources to fulfill. He examined various proposals that have emerged for effective reform, and highlighted how none of them have been the complete answer. He asserted that traditional, face-to-face, desk-based reference is not dead or in need of being eliminated, but is instead in need of enhancement. In summing up the situation, he highlighted that reference librarians want and need more support and resources to provide their highly-successful services to patrons, but they are instead seen as resistant to change by those lobbying for reform. This, in Tyckoson's estimation, made productive dialogue more difficult to achieve.

Palmer (1999) focused her examination of the future roles for reference librarians by looking at the basic mission of reference, which she defined as serving others. Palmer stated that she was disturbed by anti-reference desk perspectives because they ignored the factor of library anxiety and the draw of an easily-recognizable service point. She asserted that the reference desk functions as a key point of contact between patrons and librarians, and any move away from that would undercut the perception of how well reference librarians fulfill their mission of serving others, in addition to making librarians harder to find in a practical sense. Palmer maintained that desk service can be augmented by consultations, and that technology must be blended with traditional services in order to "re-find" the mission of reference.

From this brief examination of those articles that identify themselves as pro-reference desk, we get a clearer picture of how these articles actually dialogue with the anti-reference desk articles. Biggs (1985) and Shapiro (1987) put forth scenarios for how reference desk service can be re-organized and made more efficient. They both approached the issue from a methodological perspective, just as the majority of the anti-desk articles did. In fact, they proposed a change in methodology very similar to those proposed by Massey-Burzio (1992) and Summerhill (1994), although the two later authors considered their solutions to be anti-reference desk.

Tyckoson (1997 and 1999) and Palmer (1999) also emphasized these methodological concerns, and pointed to the solution of enhancing reference services by providing better supporting resources. In the context of these articles, there is surprising agreement among both pro- and anti-reference desk authors as they grapple with how to improve the methodology of reference while upholding Green's (1876) fundamental assumption that human-to-human interaction is important. In terms of concerns about methodology, the two sides actually seem to be closer than the tone of the debate might indicate. Not all anti-desk articles are also against face-to-face interaction, while pro-desk articles [especially those by Berger (1996), Low (1996), Tyckoson (1997 and 1999), and Palmer (1999)] are not anti-technology. The concept of two clearly defined and separate camps, divided on the basis of technology versus face-to-face interaction, falls apart when the nuances of the discussion are actually examined.

## **Competing Visions**

There is a more apparent distinction between the supposedly anti-desk articles written by Ewing and Hauptman (1995) and Campbell (1992 and 2000) and other anti-desk articles in the literature. These authors elevate the discussion about the reference desk and reference services in general beyond the realm of methods and into the realm of what the vision for reference should be. Ewing and Hauptman (1995) and Campbell (1992 and 2000) question the fundamental assumption that human-mediated reference is needed. Although various authors also suggest fielding more questions via computer-mediated systems, they continue to acknowledge the necessity of human reference librarians. Self-

proclaimed anti-desk articles by Ford (1986), Massey-Burzio (1992), and others do not reject the idea of human involvement in reference services, but instead propose reconfiguring reference to facilitate human interaction. In a more direct manner, so-called pro-desk articles by Berger (1996), Low (1996), and Tyckoson (1997 and 1999) seek to address this challenge to human-mediated reference services. They provide extensive discussion of the social and technological factors that require the continuing presence of human librarians in patrons' information quests.

Other articles have also provided perspectives that undercut the arguments for decreased human mediation in reference. Green (1876) contextualized his vision of reference in the context of patron timidity. Library anxiety continues to be an issue for patrons, especially in relation to computer technologies (Carlile, 2007). Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (2004) found, as did other studies, that library anxiety and anxiety about computers are closely related, indicating that computer-mediated reference is not the catch-all answer for reference difficulties as Ewing and Hauptman (1995) and Campbell (1992 and 2000) have proposed. In fact, at least one recent study has confirmed that patrons prefer to ask a knowledgeable person for help when they encounter difficulties in web searching (Augustine & Greene, 2002).

Although technologies in libraries may not provide the complete answer to enhancing reference service, they do provide unique methods to carry out Green's (1876) vision of reference service. With online catalogs and electronic databases, librarians have the opportunity to carry their presence into spaces where they could not in Green's day. Email and chat reference services allow patrons to ask questions right from where they are working: their desktops. This allows librarians to make themselves more approachable, and at the same time positions them uniquely to be able to offer timely advice to patrons on what may help them the most. As Green advised, present-day librarians can use reference questions to improve collection development, and new technologies like chat and email allow for even more efficient tracking of the questions that are received and the resources that patrons need and want. These non-traditional reference methods also enable librarians to more effectively market library services to their communities by granting the flexibility to advertise them where patrons are working and where they can see them as an integral part of their (online) community. By increasing their online presence and visibility, library services become connected to and more integrated into the academic life of patrons. In the current social and cultural context, librarians may be uncomfortable with Green's vision of improving the overall literary tastes of patrons. However, if one thinks of this concept in terms of information literacy, being in patrons' online communities will give librarians opportunities to help them understand valuable online sources and make discerning choices about how to use them.

New reference technologies can even facilitate the development of some of Green's (1876) recommended traits for librarians. For example, his recommendations regarding diligence and persistence in the investigation of a question can become easier to apply in the context of chat or email reference. These services allow librarians to enter an extended reference encounter with a patron. Chat programs that require patrons to furnish contact information provide the ability to follow-up with the patron in a way that was never possible with a quick, face-to-face encounter at the desk. Librarians are able to work with patrons remotely, providing them with personalized service. A librarian can walk a patron through a complex search, with the patron having the opportunity to perform the search on their own, but with the librarian "virtually" nearby in the event that he or she runs into difficulty. This type of interaction preserves what Green referred to as the patron's "reticence," while at the same time cultivating a do-it-yourself environment where the patron can learn how to research with the help of the librarian. As Ford (1986) very accurately summed up, "... in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were a number of ways to provide direct personal assistance. The current literature and modern technology present even more alternatives" (p. 494).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of two opposing views of reference that are at odds over technology in reference does not stand up to a careful study of the literature. The value of human-to-human interaction



remains a key component of both the self-described pro- and anti-reference desk literature. These differing perspectives on delivery of reference services still find a unifying factor in Green's traditional vision of reference. It remains a vital and viable description of what reference librarians aspire to because it goes beyond methodology and provides a clarity to the mission of reference—the service of patron communities—that is not dependent on how that service is delivered. It meshed well with the model of the reference desk, and it now meshes well with the new technologies that enable librarians to provide reference via new methods. This traditional vision of reference becomes an important point of agreement between the supposedly pro- or anti-desk factions, and even stands up to the challenge of another concept of reference because of its adaptability to new social and technological contexts.

This shared vision should allow individuals and institutions with differing perspectives to move forward with meaningful dialogue about how to best implement it, and how to envision the most efficient means for putting resources toward these goals. As Gorman (2001) has exhorted,

We must examine and affirm the core values of our profession if we are to flourish in a time of change and maintain the ethic of service to individuals and society. In particular, we must maintain the vital human-to-human component that typifies reference service across our history. This is an age in which human values are under strain; human contact and sympathy become more prized as they become rarer. (p. 182).

Green's original vision of reference transcends the desk or the computer. His description of reference remains vital because, as Gorman so eloquently states, it upholds the value of human-to-human interaction in a world that is increasingly techno-saturated.

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