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The Role of the Academic Reference Librarian in the Learning Commons

**Judith A. Wolfe, Ted Naylor,
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Frontline reference librarians purvey their skills in a variety of reference service models. These range from the traditional to the tiered to the information commons (IC) to the learning commons (LC). Libraries might use one pure form of any model, a hybrid model, or a model in the process of transformation. A few libraries with space and funding have fully adopted the latest model, the LC. An examination of transformations to the LC indicates that frontline reference librarians can to some extent effect changes in their professional environments.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ROLE OF THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

From the beginning of librarianship, the role of the reference librarian has been defined by the patrons' need for human mediation.¹ Reference librarians apply critical-thinking skills, emotional intelligence, teaching ability, and question analysis to connect the user with appropriate resources. While some libraries developed variations (such as tiered models), the traditional model, involving face-to-face interaction between a patron and a librarian who answered every type of question from one or more multipurpose service points, prevailed throughout the "paper era."

By necessity, reference librarians were shackled to the library and the print collection. Public-access computers and remote access to data sets (i.e., Dialog) quickly sowed the seeds for a revolution in reference routines. Dialog search techniques were only the beginning. Soon, cyberspace was born. Staying abreast of new technology and upgrading computer skills became an integral part of reference librarians' duties. In the new medium's infancy, the reference librarian's role evolved to include nurturing and developing this new electronic "baby." The concomitant teaching role expanded to instruction in the use of multiple material formats, the online public access catalogs (OPACs), and the Internet. As the need to assist patrons with technical issues grew, the single access point for all types of assistance sometimes frustrated librarians and failed their patron.

Libraries sometimes experimented with new types of tiered models that addressed the need for technical help. At one level, a general-information desk might be staffed by student assistants, graduate assistants, or staff. Another desk, staffed by specially trained librarians and paraprofessionals, might provide technical assistance. Specialists might be designated for word-processing, spreadsheet, SSPS, Blackboard, RefWorks, and other software assistance. Subject-specialist librarians might provide in-depth research assistance, often by appointment.

Instruction sometimes became closely tied to reference services. Other libraries maintained a traditional service.

With the number of remote library users rapidly growing, the need for new reference venues is clear. Reference services have implemented e-mail, chat, instant messaging (IM), voice over Internet protocol (VoIP), and text messaging. All of these new services provide new communication challenges in reference and instruction.

Whatever the service model, attuned librarians recognize that the library website, the physical facilities, the print and electronic collections, reference, and instruction should be essential and interconnected components.

THE INFORMATION COMMONS

One response to technology was the development of the information commons (IC). Beagle defines a library IC as a “new type of physical facility” or section of a library “specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around an integrated digital environment” along with the support technology.² The physical library space is coordinated to become an extension of student study areas, and workspaces are organized to accommodate collaboration. Therefore the physical commons is designed to incorporate a cluster of access points to the digital arena. Armed with these access points, trained staff help users query, navigate, and process information.

In this “functional integration,” some reference librarians continued to assume the role of general-information provider, technical expert, referral assistant, point of contact, and help center. Even more than before, librarians became jacks-of-all-trades and had insufficient time to master any one trade.

If one envisions the library as two interacting spheres—the virtual and the physical—the library as interactive system and the user experience of that system demand attention. The stage was set for the next new thing. There were, it appeared, many stakeholders in library services. The interactive system expands to include not just library-based information-technology specialists, metadata librarians, media specialists, and bibliographic instruction coordinators, but also campus-wide technology professionals, instructional designers, and distance-education coordinators. The evolutionary stream of social technology blurred the boundaries of print, and the “functional integration of technology and service delivery to realign the library with the rapidly evolving digital environment” became the order of business.³ For some libraries, this order of business is leading to the next step from the IC to the LC.

FROM INFORMATION COMMONS TO LEARNING COMMONS

The terms *information commons* and *learning commons* may easily be confused. Bennett, however, defines an LC as a place that brings

people together not around informally shared interests, as happens in traditional common rooms, but around

shared learning tasks, sometimes formalized in class assignments. The core activity of a learning commons would not be the manipulation and mastery of information, as in an information commons, but the collaborative learning by which students turn information into knowledge and sometimes into wisdom.⁴

Libraries often create new LCs during an extensive renovation or new building project, where money is flowing and new space can be added. Though some might consider the LC a necessary response to a changing environment, a high-performance LC requires the luxury of a committed university administration and community; a budget big enough to build, renovate, or reorganize existing reference space; and the ability to bring together units or groups with disparate knowledge and culture.

The most visible and highly touted feature of the LC, in comparison to the IC and other reference models, is the number and variety of stakeholders both within the library and within other campus groups and units. Intended to foster collaboration, communication, and easy access to assistance, the added physical space might be a new environment for reference librarians.

THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING COMMONS

The frontline reference librarians’ role in initiating, planning, implementing, and operating LCs is unclear. Scholarly articles about LCs often focus not on reference librarians but on the students at the center of the LC or on the other stakeholders, such as university administrators. While the literature does not acknowledge the fullness of the reference librarians’ role, a few pale signs appear.

Reference librarian service on LC planning and implementation committees does appear to be common. For example, the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s LC Planning Committee, in its final report, notes that in addition to the original library representative, “the Library’s Information Services Department requested that two additional librarians from their department serve on the committee.”⁵ In the case of the LC, they write that “evidence-based information exchanges between librarians and their faculty and student constituencies continue to fuel collaborative partnerships.”⁶

Haug, in “Learning Curve: Adapting Library Spaces,” points to librarians’ observations as the origin of the LC at Longwood University:

Library staff began observing that groups of students frequently crowded around a single PC to work on collaborative projects. University professors seemed to be assigning more and more group activities, and library staff saw that the commons area should be redesigned to meet the need for more collaborative style workspaces.⁷

FOR YOUR ENRICHMENT

Somerville and Brar, in their case study of the library at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, note reference librarian involvement at every stage. In terms of early recognition of changing environments, they write that

amidst rapid technological change, aggravating financial uncertainty, and escalating community expectations, librarians at California Polytechnic . . . Have recognized that nimble responsiveness requires reinvention of library processes, procedures and services. . . . They understood that this would require changing how they think and what they think about.⁸

In terms of data collection and implementation of the LC, they write that “data collection and interpretation requires sustained face-to-face communication between librarians and student researchers. . . . The dialogues offered librarians valuable experiential insights into use constituency perspectives.”⁹ Despite the dearth of literature on the subject, reference librarian’s contributions are vital to LC’s success, and will doubtless be a fundamental aspect of the continuing role of librarians in reference services.

PREPARATION

As many have noted, preparation is everything. In Abraham Lincoln’s words, “If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six sharpening my axe.” For reference librarians, sharpening the axe might translate as

- understanding the institution and its service issues;
- building and advertising his or her unique knowledge of research, sources, and users;
- being aware of literature and trends;
- communicating with other librarians and visiting other libraries; and
- creating collaborative working relationships with other library and campus units.

POSITIONING THE LIBRARY FOR CHANGE

Reference librarians also can help libraries move incrementally toward an LC model. Elements of the LC can be developed and implemented as space and available resources allow. These might include adding staff who help students in word processing and computer skills, hiring student assistants with specialized computer skills, developing closer relationships between reference and instruction units, or sharing staff between reference and media services desks. By making such smaller changes to service models, libraries can respond to new user patterns and demands before major institutional change comes about. Eckel et al. describe a typology of change in which these incremental steps might be considered adjustments or isolated change.¹⁰ Therefore these steps help meet users’ needs without exerting extensive pressure on the library. If the library implements a full transformation later,

the pressure on the library might be lower.

CONTRIBUTING EXPERTISE

Deb Carver, director at the University of Oregon, responding to a reference panel at the Greater Western Library Alliance, notes that specific changes in a reference operation are less important than the culture created.¹¹ The “fluidity and trust” of a collaborative and highly communicative environment, adds Kristine Helbling, a fellow panelist, allow reference services to move from a “unit-centric to a library wide operation” like an LC.¹² Reference librarians can contribute to an institution’s dialog about an LC by doing the following:

- preventing wholesale adoption of models that do not fit patron needs
- helping set appropriate goals and outcomes for the LC
- coordinating the library services with the curriculum needs

Assisting faculty with “design thinking . . . course goals and learning objectives,”¹³ according to Sinclair, brings the reference librarian in line with the concept of the blended librarian. As described by Bell and Shank, a blended librarian is “an academic librarian who combines the traditional skill set of librarianship with the information technologist’s hardware/software skills, and the instructional or educational designer’s ability to apply technology appropriately in the teaching-learning process.”¹⁴ In this model, collaboration is essential, and “the learning commons may be seen as an extension of the classroom experience.”¹⁵

COLLABORATION IS KEY

Implementing the LC model is in many ways similar to setting up a household: it involves restructuring the organization, learning new skills, and creating new spaces. Given its nature, the evolution of an LC will usually require a major transformational effort by numerous stakeholders. In some areas, such as the allocation of space or resources, reference librarians have limited roles to play. For example, they might perform specific tasks, such as weeding older paper collections and helping reconfigure existing service points. How the reference department adjusts and copes with a new space, however, is a critical component of a successful LC. Reference librarians can help create an organizational culture that embraces change, communication, and collaboration.

Reference librarian attitudes and knowledge can enrich the internal communication and collaboration necessary to the LC. A positive and robust reference department can serve as an excellent role model for accepting change and providing a positive climate of growth in the organization. Reference librarians possess unique knowledge and experience that can facilitate the transition to the LC model, and they will most likely have transferable characteristics that are useful at every stage of development. In new technology, reference librarians

are already working in an environment and discipline in which technology and knowledge are, to some degree, already integrated, and they are used to dealing with a diverse array of patrons, coworkers, and library administrators.

Reference librarians are perfectly positioned to collaborate with other stakeholders in the development of an LC model. They operate in integrated virtual and physical worlds, where the human and the computer work together. If reference librarians are operating successfully, they already have ongoing dialogues with other units and strong relationships with individuals in other units. A collaborative culture cannot be manufactured for the transition to an LC and abandoned thereafter. Two things are clear: collaboration is important when developing an LC, and it can be difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, stakeholders' ability to communicate across disciplines is a prerequisite for success. Reference librarians, along with their research skills, already have the capacity to facilitate communication between groups through interaction with diverse patrons.

Space plans generally include a constellation of reference, instruction, technology, and other offices around a large space for a computer lab and other services. Often, print reference collections are downsized or eliminated. It is ironic that the technology-driven LC brings many reference librarians back to a more traditional focus on research assistance and information provision. In many cases, IT specialists answer numerous technology-related questions, paraprofessionals field general questions, and reference librarians are on call only for the rarer research questions and consultations. Referrals from staff are common and consultations often take place. Troubleshooting access issues and revamping reference-interview processes become the norm in this connected environment. Collaboration between students and within the library takes on multiple forms. Assisting in this collaboration poses a new challenge for the reference librarian: reaching the patron via the appropriate technology. In adapting to this "fluid environment," the reference librarian might feel the urgency of meeting new ongoing demands.¹⁶

Three Portraits of LCs in Action

The West Commons at the Georgia Institute of Technology has the General Productivity Centre, which includes workstations, a presentation rehearsal studio, a multimedia studio, tutors, and two service desks. Stuart wrote about the expansion to an East Commons, which added flexible learning and relaxing spaces and a café.¹⁷ Later, the library opened offices for academic advising, tutoring, computer assistance, and other campus services. The central desk in the West Commons is staffed by student assistants from the campus's Office of Information Technology, who help with software problems and hardware maintenance. A second Information Services desk along one side is staffed by librarians and paraprofessionals in newly created information associate positions that combine reference and technical skills. Stuart notes that "Information Services staff quickly adjusted to living on the

margin of the West Commons."¹⁸ Reference librarian duties were broadened to include creating events for students and teaching freshman seminar courses.

At California State University, San Marcos (CSU San Marcos), a new library designed to function as an LC opened in 2004. A reference area is close to public workstations, an instruction classroom, reference and instruction librarians' offices, reference and government document collections, copy services, and an assistive technology lab. After a period of testing various staffing configurations, two student information assistants with special technology training staff the reference desk. Questions can be referred to on-call librarians or the library systems staff. The librarians have stated that the service exceeds student expectations and that the system frees librarians to work closely with students in individual consultations and to work closely with faculty on information literacy projects.¹⁹

The University of Massachusetts W. E. B. Du Bois Library LC includes a café, a writing center, advising and career services, an assistive technologies center, and interlibrary loan service. Technical support and general reference support staff share a service desk. A separate reference and research desk staffed by reference librarians with subject specialties offers more complex or extended in-person help and manages phone, e-mail, and IM services. Many questions can be answered at both service points, and referrals between the desks are routine. All staff communicates regularly through meetings, e-mail, and blogs.²⁰ An assessment found that the Reference and Research Desk was very effective and, in surveys, highly valued by both students and librarians.²¹ Not only did the reference librarians collaborate to produce this successful model, but one librarian noted that the model fostered further "collaboration and information sharing."²²

WHAT IS COMING 'ROUND THE BEND? THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN'S FUTURE ROLE

The advances in technology have resulted in library users with different expectations along with more access points to information. The reference librarian, to compete with ever evolving virtual media, must now be prepared to join the Twitter generation. Patrons now often contact reference librarians via text messaging, e-mail, IM, Facebook, and Twitter. Reference has become more of a juggling act because librarians must manage everything from face-to-face contact to text messaging reference. Here are some suggestions and predictions in the management of this new phase of reference:

- The university library must advertise what services it offers and what value it adds to the university experience. The library must overcome the "we don't need a library—we have Google" mentality among patrons, especially within the economic climate of today.
- The reference librarian liaison role will take on even greater importance through increased interaction with teaching faculty.

FOR YOUR ENRICHMENT

- Library instruction and reference librarians will interact more closely to develop online resources.
- Reference librarians must be more involved in the development of the libraries' online presence.
- Reference librarians must balance the LC role while still maintaining the more traditional services and collections.
- Reference librarians must also be well versed in the technology students are using, such as IM, mobile devices, and social networking.
- Communication and collaboration are key elements that must be fostered and respected at all levels. The cultural environment is an important consideration in any new service, and one must have other stakeholders on their side to have an effective program.
- Reference librarians must increase and maintain effectiveness through access to training and the time to learn and digest new skills.
- Reference librarians must have a focus on building and sustaining effective training and cross-training programs. Sordt lists six areas in which "2.0 reference librarians" might require training: customer service, social networking and collaboration, instruction, collection development, website development, and reference.²³
- Student-assistant training will be more critical as students take on a greater role in the LC.
- As funding diminishes because of the currently grim economic environment, reference librarians must learn to do more with less in terms of adding or enhancing services.
- Reference librarians, despite the advances in technology, must remain focused on their patrons.

ASSESSMENT

Reference librarians and other stakeholders must assume that in the transition to an LC, mistakes will happen, challenges will continue to exist, collaboration and communication must continue, continued assessments must be performed, and adjustments must be made. For example, CSU San Marcos abandoned a special research consultation office because students simply met with librarians in their offices.²⁴ Thompson and Sonntag suggest that libraries plan for flexibility and change, and they bravely point out their own institution's failure to foresee how the new reference area would change patron–librarian interactions.²⁵

In addition, the LC will continue to evolve in response to environments that remain beyond libraries' control. The LC and its staff will likely at some point be, in military parlance, OBE (overcome/overtaken by events), in which the "initial solution is rendered useless by unexpected events, raising a need for a different solution."²⁶

Reference librarians can participate in the ongoing change using the same knowledge and skills they brought to the original transition to an LC. Mountfield reports that University of Auckland librarians contribute to assessment with "periodic appraisal of services, activities and operation."²⁷ Mountfield also points out that librarian research

into educational trends and new technology can point the way to new developments.

CONCLUSION

Reference librarians have fundamental skills and knowledge that are applicable to all current and future reference models. Reference librarians have a major role to play in the planning and implementation of the LC and in the day-to-day patron interaction within the LC. By facilitating high levels of communication and collaboration between stakeholders, reference librarians help ensure the LC will meet the high expectations and demands of the modern user. The reference librarian will continue to play a vital role in the synthesis of information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom, which supports the goal of the LC and the overall mission of higher education.

It will be interesting to see how the new concept of the blended librarian affects the LC model. The two are currently contradictory: the LC brings together librarians and staff with specific skills whereas in the blended librarian model the reference librarian is expected to be expert in all areas. According to Bell and Shank, "The concept of the blended librarian is largely built on creating a movement that will encourage and enable academic librarians to evolve into a new role in which the skills and knowledge of instructional design are wedded to our existing library and information technology skills."²⁸ However the reference model evolves, librarians must be able to communicate, collaborate, and change. As Sinclair remarks regarding the blended library, "Librarians who can adapt to the changing information landscape quickly and easily will be sought after."²⁹

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