

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING “REFERENCE”

by *Debra Shaw*
&
Emily Okada



INTRODUCTION

In 2001 the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) revised its curriculum for the Master of Library Science Degree.¹ The employers of SLIS students, SLIS alumni, and the faculty members and students who participated in the curriculum review agreed that, even at the dawn of the 21st century, any student planning to call himself or herself a librarian would need to take a course in reference sources and services.

Our easy acceptance of a basic grounding in reference as a *sine qua non* for librarians is not surprising. “Reference” is also an easy sell for incoming students: whatever their experiences or stereotypes, almost all have interacted with a reference librarian before their arrival at SLIS. Those students who do not plan to “do reference” or even become librarians can usually be persuaded that learning about information sources will help them be better, more efficient users of libraries as they pursue their studies.

DEFINITIONS OF REFERENCE

What, exactly, should students learn in this basic, required reference course? Given the range of “customer” perspectives (a variety of students, their potential employers), it is not surprising that there will be many answers to the question. The American Library Association’s Reference and User Services Association’s “Guidelines for Information Services” begin:

Libraries have an inherent obligation to provide information service to support the educational, recreational, personal and economic endeavors of the members of their respective communities, as appropriate to the libraries’ individual missions.

Information services in libraries take a variety of forms including direct personal assistance, directories, signs, exchange of information culled from a reference source, reader’s advisory service, dissemination of information in anticipation of user needs or interests, and access to electronic information.

A library, because it possesses and organizes for use its community’s concentration of information

resources, must develop information services appropriate to its community and in keeping with the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights.

These services should take into account the information-seeking behaviors, the information needs, and the service expectations of the members of that community.

Working with just these four sentences, a basic reference course should encourage students to understand:

1. the variety of libraries in the world and the range of purposes for which they are used
2. the kinds of assistance librarians can provide for library users
3. the professional expectations of reference service
4. the research and evaluation on which services are developed and improved.

Wilson (2000, pp. 389-390) divided the abilities to be covered in a course for reference librarians into three areas:

1. Training users to access and evaluate information sources. (The ability to access and evaluate the validity of information sources is a key element in developing information literacy.)
2. The “invisible function” of reference librarians grounded in the fact that many users are not clearly aware of their initial information needs.
3. Service that provides users with information about information (meta-data) as well as factual information from the ready reference sources.

This is indeed a lot to cover in one course, even if it is viewed as an entry-level course which will serve as the introduction for further study. Teaching a beginning reference course is all the more daunting if one recalls one’s own introduction to reference work fondly (generations of Indiana librarians still speak of SLIS former faculty members Marian Armstrong and Joyce Taylor, among others, with great respect).

TEAM TEACHING AS AN OPTION

The basic reference course for students in SLIS's Master of Library Science program is "Information Sources and Services." At Bloomington it has been overseen by Emily Okada, Associate Librarian, Undergraduate Services/Information Commons, and Adjunct Assistant Professor/Coordinator of Reference and Public Services Programs in the School of Library and Information Science. Recognizing the value of presenting different perspectives in information services, she had developed an extensive roster of practicing librarians who spoke to the class each term. We decided to develop this approach further, with the goal of adjusting the mix of theory and practice to suit an entry-level graduate professional course. An additional aim was to allocate responsibilities for the course to "play to the strengths" of the instructors.

Experts in education talk about team teaching and teacher collaboration – enabling teachers with diverse backgrounds to work together. Heath, Carlson, and Kurtz (1987) provide an interesting perspective on team teaching in professional education. They considered three models for teaching the basic optometry course: a single instructor, multiple lecturers, or team teaching, and chose team teaching approach. They found several advantages with this choice, including the consistency in how topics were covered and the integration of theory and practice.

We adopted the team approach with the hope of discovering similar strengths. Because the course is required for all Master of Library Science students, offering an intellectually challenging, consistent, and repeatable introductory course was essential. We have approached the course as the first step in the students' professional careers, the aim is to develop a partnership between students and instructors where opportunities and responsibilities for teaching and learning are shared.

SLIS enrollment continues to be strong. In fall 2002 there were 111 new MLS candidates in Bloomington, seventy-three of them enrolled in L524: Information Sources and Services (the "Reference" class, formerly L504). In fall 2003, seventy-five students took the course. Spring semesters see fewer students, but never fewer than thirty in the past two academic years; the summer section of L524 has robust enrollment as well. The challenge for us was to provide a quality learning experience for the students and a satisfying teaching experience for instructors.

The School's objectives for the course are:

- 1) To prepare students to become effective reference librarians. They will understand their responsibilities

ties to clients seeking information, and the nature of the information resources reference librarians use;

- 2) To assist information seekers, they will have theoretical and practical perspectives to:
 - Understand how people approach the search for information
 - Be able to assess information needs effectively through question negotiation
 - Be able to contribute to information literacy/library instruction services
- 3) To use information resources effectively they will:
 - Accurately and efficiently identify information sources, both print and electronic
 - Carefully evaluate information sources, both print and electronic
 - Use appropriate and efficient search strategies
- 4) They will be prepared for professional responsibilities, comprehending the goal of effective reference services for diverse clientele in all types of library and information center settings.

These are widely accepted as important skills for reference librarians. Further, we believe, students will learn these complex skills best when they can take advantage of various learning opportunities and role models. Observing and interacting with practicing reference librarians provides this variation and reinforcement.

IMPLEMENTING THE LECTURE/DISCUSSION APPROACH

The Information Sources and Services course has continued to evolve from 2002 through 2004. Several librarians have been remarkably generous with their time and expertise. Many of the people listed in Table 1 have made more than one presentation to the class. We have gradually adjusted the assignments to these lecturers, using student feedback as well as the perspective of the course coordinators to have the speakers focus at the level where most students are able to absorb the material. We have also increased the consistency of assignments and explored ways to engage learning without overburdening instructors with grading. The advice of experts from Campus Instructional Consulting and the Campus Writing Program has been helpful, as has the enthusiastic support of Zilia Estrada, the doctoral student who assisted with the course in 2003-2004.

Table 1. Lecturers in Information Sources and Services at IU Bloomington, 2002-2004

Name	Position
Steve Backs	Manager, Adult Services, Monroe County Public Library
Kris Brancolini	Director, Digital Library Program, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Jennifer Bryan	Reference and Documents Librarian, Law Library, Indiana University, Bloomington
Angela Courtney	Librarian for English and American Literature, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Diane Dallis	Instructional Services Librarian, Information Commons/Undergraduate Services, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
DeLoice Holliday	Multicultural Outreach Librarian, Information Commons/Undergraduate Services, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Cecile Jagodzinski	Director of Collection Development and Digital Scholarship, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Lou Malcomb	Head, Government Information, Microforms & Statistical Services, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Marsha Miller	Instruction Librarian, Indiana State University Library, Terre Haute
Mickey Needham	Manager, Ellettsville Branch, Monroe County Public Library
Bob Noel	Head, Swain Hall Library, Indiana University, Bloomington
Mary Popp	Public Services Librarian, Library Information Technology, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington
Jeanne Holba Puacz	Systems and Reference Librarian, Vigo County Public Library, Terre Haute
Mary Strow	Head, HPER Library, Indiana University Bloomington
Carolyn Walters	Head, Information Commons/Undergraduate Services, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington

One assignment has remained constant: the observation and description of a library public service desk. We reserve time for students to meet in groups of two or three with one of the course coordinators as they work on this assignment. The end-of-semester paper describing this experience is an opportunity for all the coordinators to see how well students have integrated ideas from their readings, lectures, and discussions in this class and others, as well as their prior experiences and professional aspirations.

The general plan for the course is to have a weekly lecture for all students, supplemented by discussion sections of smaller size. The lecturers present “eternal verities” and provide the first hand experience that enriches students’ understanding of what reference and public services work entails. We attempt to address issues at the students’ level. One speaker mentioned being “on the desk” about 15 hours a week, which prompted a student to ask what librarians do with the rest of their time. (As noted above, this is an introductory course; as instructors, we are pleased when the classroom atmosphere encourages students to ask what is on their minds.) The guest speakers are also, unavoidably, role models. Having a variety of speakers reinforces that reference librarians have different philosophies of service as well as a variety of places of employment and supervision.

The discussion sections serve two purposes. Sometimes they expand on the lectures, for example with a practicum hour spent in the library reference room answering ready reference questions after the lecture on that topic. Other weeks the discussion sections may deal with theoretical issues, such as models of information seeking, or with topics which lend themselves to exploration and small group discussions – we usually have a class observe as one member asks a chat reference question during the session on computer-mediated reference communication, for example.

NEXT STEPS

Part of the fascination of public services is the constancy of change. For practicing librarians, developments are part of growing with the job – and sometimes it is worth recalling how much has moved has changed since we verified citations in the printed *National Union Catalog*. New librarians in a sense make a giant leap to join the ranks. Chandler (2001, p. 263) describes the challenge:

Through the curriculum in graduate schools, reference and information access professionals must be prepared to adjust to the different levels of user experience and sophistication, to adapt to various roles as providers of assistance on accessing information, and to assist users to clarify their

information needs in physical or virtual environments. Graduates must be prepared to implement and design services with an understanding of cognitive styles and their effect on the information-seeking behavior of users. Information providers must understand and consider the contextual setting in which people seek, use, and create information. In addition, information professionals must provide information services and products to increasingly culturally diverse populations.

Each semester the faculty and students in L524 forge a new partnership in exploring reference sources and services. The rapid evolution of the reference sources is matched by the continuing enthusiasm of incoming MLS candidates who will develop the perspectives, skills, and experience to be effective, sometimes outstanding, reference librarians. We are intrigued by the other kinds of partnerships waiting to be developed, refined, and explored in teaching this course. Readers of *Indiana Libraries* interested in contributing to the Information Sources and Services course as speakers or in other ways should contact either of the authors.

NOTES

¹The foundation courses for the Master of Library Science program develop skills in five areas. Students must choose at least one course from each area:

1. Assist and Educate Users of Libraries and Information Centers
 - L524 Information Sources and Services
2. Develop and Manage Library Collections
 - L528 Collection Development and Management
3. Organize and Represent Information Resources
 - L505 Organization and Representation of Knowledge and Information
 - L520 Bibliographic Access and Control
4. Apply Management and Leadership Skills
 - L527 Management of Libraries and Information Centers
 - L550 Issues in the Management of Library Services and Programs
 - L553 The School Media Specialist
 - L587 Rare Book Libraries and Librarianship
5. Conduct and Analyze Research
 - L509 Introduction to Research and Statistics
 - L643 Evaluation of Information Systems
 - L651 Evaluation of Library Sources and Services

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Debora Shaw (shawd@indiana.edu) is Professor and Interim Dean of the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Emily Okada (eokada@indiana.edu) is Associate Head and Reference Services Librarian in Information Commons/Undergraduate Services in the Indiana University Bloomington Libraries.