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Fall 2016

Reference Interview Transcript and Analysis

Introduction

The following transcript is a fictional dialog between a patron and a reference librarian that addresses an ethical issue. The dialog takes place at the reference desk of a public library. The purpose of this exercise is to analyze and evaluate a reference interview using measurable criteria defined in the guidelines of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) for general behavioral performance and for matters regarding health and medical questions. These guidelines cover five main areas including Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow-up (RUSA 2013). They provide specifics for health and medical reference, including the Role of Information Services Staff, Reference Transaction Professional Behavior, and Ethics (RUSA, 2015).

Reference Interview Transcript

A woman with an 8-year old child approaches the reference desk. The reference librarian is wearing a nametag with her name and "Reference Librarian" on it. The woman approaching the desk is the patron in the following dialog.

Dialogue	RUSA Annotations
Reference Librarian (*Smiles, makes eye contact, turns toward patron.*): Good afternoon. How may I help you?	**1.0 Visibility/Approachability** (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: I need information about lice. I've found information on the internet, but I want to make sure I'm looking at a reliable source.	
Reference Librarian (*Faces patron, nods, maintains eye contact. Ensures discretion*	**2.0 Interest 2.2.1** "Faces the patron." **2.2.2** "Maintains or re-establishes eye contact

by speaking quietly.): Certainly. That's an interesting and important topic. What kind of information are you looking for?	with the patron." (RUSA, 2013) **2.0 Reference Transaction Professional Behavior 2.2** "Staff should use discretion." **2.5** "Staff should be welcoming, as asking health related questions can be stressful and/or embarrassing." (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: I would like to know about safe methods of treating lice.	
Reference Librarian: Okay. Are you interested in information on *head* lice?	**3.0 Listening/Inquiring 3.1.8** "Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the research query." (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: Yes.	
Reference Librarian: Should we look for general resources, or resources focused on children?	**3.0 Listening/Inquiring 3.1.8** "Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the research query." (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: I need materials that are aimed at treating small children.	
Reference Librarian: So, you need general information about treating head lice in small children. Is this correct?	**3.0 Listening/Inquiring 3.1.9** "Maintains objectivity" (RUSA, 2013) **3.0 Ethics 3.2 Professional Behavior 3.2.5** "Staff should promote access to health information for all by creating an impartial and non-judgmental environment of inquiry." (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: Yes.	
Reference Librarian: I am not a healthcare professional, but I am happy to direct you to reliable resources designed for patients.	**1.0 Role if Information Services Staff 1.1** "When asked health or medical questions, staff should make their roles clear" (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: Yes, of course. I understand.	
Reference Librarian: I suggest looking in our online version of the *Gale Encyclopedia of Children's Health*. This is a well-known and reliable source that is suitable for patients as well as professionals. It is focused on children under four years. Otherwise, we have *The Merck Manual Home Health Handbook*. It covers a complete range of disorders, contains graphics, and is designed for the consumers. Do either of these resources seem like they might suit your needs?	**2.0 Reference Transaction Professional Behavior 2.1** "Staff should direct users to reliable and verifiable health information" **2.8** "Staff should consider appropriate material, language, reading level and images when recommending resources." (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: I'd like to try the encyclopedia for children under four. Are there a lot of medical terms? Is it difficult to understand?	
Reference Librarian: Medical jargon is	**2.0 Reference Transaction Professional**

defined, so you should be able to understand it. If necessary, we can try something else.	**Behavior 2.8** "Staff should consider appropriate material, language, reading level and images when recommending resources." (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: Perfect.	
Reference Librarian (*Shows the patron to a library computer in a private space.*): Let's use this computer where you can have some privacy.	**3.0 Ethics 3.2 Professional Behavior 3.2.2** "Staff should respect users' privacy." (RUSA, 2015)
Patron: Thank you.	
Reference Librarian: Do you have an account with the library and a library card?	
Patron: Yes.	
Reference Librarian: I will show you how to access the resource on the library computer. You can also access this remotely. Log onto your account with your library card number and PIN. Then search the catalog for the *Gale Encyclopedia of Children's Health*. Now search the index for head lice. Here it is. Does that make sense to you?	**4.0 Searching 4.1.7** "Explains how to use sources." **4.2.1** "Accompanies the patron in the search" (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: Yes, thank you. Here it is.	
Reference Librarian: You can use this resource remotely at any time for this or other information needs you have. Are you all set?	**4.0 Searching 4.1.7** "Explains how to use sources." (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: Yes, I'll be fine now.	
Reference Librarian (*Smiles.*): I'll leave you to it then. If you need anything else, please let me or another librarian know.	**5.0 Follow-up 5.1.2** "Encourages the patron to return if he/she has further questions." (RUSA, 2013)
Patron: I sure will. Thanks for your help.	

Analysis of Reference Transaction by RUSA Guidelines with Ethical Considerations

The above fictional dialog represents a successful reference interview according

to the RUSA guidelines. The reference librarian is clearly visible, wears a nametag

stating her title of reference librarian, and signals her approachability to the client by

turning toward her, establishing eye contact, and initiating an interaction. She encourages

the patron by appearing interested in the topic and focusing on the patron. The librarian

makes respectful inquiries about the patron's information needs. She listens to the patron and ensures she has identified the patron's needs by clarifying the question. The patron is instructed on how to access library materials online and how to locate the desired information in the chosen resource. The librarian ensures that the patron is satisfied with the information, and then concludes the reference transaction by encouraging the patron to return with any further questions. (RUSA, 2013)

There are several ethical considerations involved with the transcript above. The reference librarian clarifies her role to the patron by explaining that although she can advise her about reliable resources, she is not a healthcare professional. She conducts the transaction in a neutral and respectful tone, is non-judgmental, and refrains from making assumptions. Although the patron is accompanied by an eight year old child, the librarian does not assume that the child has head lice. Further inquiries narrow the topic down to head lice, not body lice, and clarify that the patron is in fact looking for information about treating head lice in children under four. The librarian selects materials appropriate for laymen, and verifies this with the patron. (RUSA, 2015) The materials recommended to the patron are identified by Cassell & Hiremath (2013) as part of "an improved selection of comprehensive and comprehensible medical information" (pp. 179-181). They are chosen by the librarian based on their accessibility to consumers, their reputation as reliable sources, and the general and succinct nature of the information provided.

The reference librarian must respect the patron's confidentiality. Ecklund (2013) claims that, "the right to privacy is highly valued, and often assailed, in an age of social media and information security breaches" (p. 377). The librarian in the fictional transaction recognizes that the subject may be sensitive. She speaks discretely to the

patron and offers a library computer in a private setting. The librarian must not alert others to the presence of head lice among library patrons. In fact, she should not and does not ask if the patron or her family have head lice. Although the above example of head lice is seemingly mundane, it is related to the ethical dilemma faced by librarians that pit patron privacy against the safety of the public. Garoogian (1991) explores the role of the librarian in "the conflict between the common good and the sanctity of the individual" (p. 227). She believes that "the public must believe that the library is a sanctuary where individuals can feel unconstrained by the possibility that the materials they use, the books they read, or the questions they ask will become public knowledge" (p. 229). If the patron in this scenario were seeking advice on alternative methods of treating a deadly and highly contagious disease that she had recently contracted, the librarian would be faced with a serious ethical challenge. Should she respect the client's privacy by staying silent, or should she alert authorities that a patron is exposing the public to a deadly disease and probably refusing conventional treatment? Librarians should be counseled not only by loosely defined guidelines, but also by their own morals and judgment.

The success of the above fictional reference transaction is based on the librarian's understanding and implementation of behaviors and attributes recommended by RUSA during the reference process. The librarian pays particular attention to ethical concerns regarding medical questions. She is attentive, pleasant, respectful, neutral, provides reliable and suitable resources, and ensures that the patron's information needs are met. Furthermore, she is sensitive to the confidentiality of the patron. In this scenario, the patron has had a positive experience, and is likely to return to the library for her information needs and to recommend the library's reference services to others.

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Traditional Face-to-Face Reference: Analysis

On 29 August 2016 I visited my local public library in Switzerland to ask the reference librarian if the library had any materials in English. This type of query is considered a readers' advisory service, which "is the quest to put the right resources in the hands of the right reader" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 7). The purpose of this visit and request was to evaluate the library's reference services using measurable criteria defined in the guidelines of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). These guidelines cover five main areas including Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up (Reference and User Services Association, n.d.).

The public library I visited is small, and has one librarian desk, which serves as both the reference and circulation desk. The desk is centrally located at the entrance, and is highly visible. Apart from three or four patrons in the study area, the library was empty. No librarian was at the desk, or anywhere else in the library. After standing conspicuously at the desk for several minutes I looked around the library. I then peeked into the adjoining café and outside but could identify no library staff. After about 10 minutes a staff member entered the library, sat at the desk, and began to type at the computer. She was not wearing a badge or a nametag, so I was unable to determine whether she was a professional librarian, some other type of employee, or a volunteer. (She will be referred to as the librarian.) I waited for her to look up, make eye contact, or initiate a conversation as I approached the desk. She did not, so I said, "Hello," at which point she looked up, smiled, and greeted me.

The librarian responded to my question about the library's collection of English language materials by pointing and telling me where the foreign language books were located. She did not seem interested and did not inquire any further into the type of resource I was looking for. I headed in the indicated direction and found that the English language collection consisted of a couple shelves of old paperback romances. Apparently, little to no thought had been given to the collection, all of which was probably donated to the library by one or two patrons. After browsing the collection, I returned to the desk. I asked if there was anywhere I could find more books in English. The librarian suggested that I might try the library in Lausanne, but did not give me the name of the library, the website, street or email address, information on what type of materials I might find in Lausanne, or how to search the catalog online. I thanked her and left.

None of the RUSA criteria were met in this reference interview. Although the reference desk was visible, the librarian was not. The librarian did not appear interested in my query and did not bother to assess what I was looking for beyond the language. She did not perform a search and did not make suggestions or provide explanations about resources available outside this particular library branch. The librarian did not bother to follow up on the reference transaction until I returned to the desk.

Firstly, the librarian should actually be present in the library. If she was attending to an emergency, using the restroom, or having a smoke out back, she should have posted a "Be back in 5 minutes" sign at the desk. She should have been the one to initiate the interaction and establish a good rapport. Instead of brushing off my request by pointing in the direction of the foreign language books, she should have made an effort to pinpoint exactly what I was looking for. Recognizing that I speak French with an English accent,

she should have assumed that I was familiar with the services and resources in the area. I would have expected that the librarian, certainly aware of the scant collection of English language books, would have immediately pointed this out and offered suggestions for locating more books in English. Although French is the official language in this region, a large percentage of residents are not native French speakers. It was therefore reasonable to assume that the library's collection included foreign language materials. Given the high percentage of foreign language residents in the area and the fact that, other than a few people in the study area, I was the only patron in the library at the time, I was disappointed that the librarian was not more helpful.

If this person was a volunteer, she should have referred me to a professional who could help me. However, even a volunteer should be trained to give patrons basic information and respond to common requests. She should have referred me to the private English library in [Village A] or to the public library in [City B], which has a much larger collection. She should have given me the web address of the Lausanne public library and showed me how to search the catalog online. To conclude the interview, she should have confirmed that I was satisfied and had enough information to continue my quest for materials in English. I did not feel welcome or that my information needs were a matter of concern. Based on this transaction, I would not return to this library or refer any friends here.

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Synchronous Phone Reference

On September 2, 2016 I telephoned the reference librarian at the [local] County Public Library to ask for information on late 19th Century French operettas. I had hoped for a skilled answer, in which "the right resources are located, sifted, and judged so that only the best sources are selected for research consumption" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 40). The purpose of this request was to evaluate the library's telephone reference services using measurable criteria defined in the guidelines of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). These guidelines cover five main areas including Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up, and provide specifics for remote reference services. (Reference and User Services Association, n.d.)

Before contacting the library, I had determined that I wanted materials dealing with 19th Century French operetta. The reason for my research was my involvement in an upcoming production of Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Le Mariage aux Lanternes*. I searched the online catalog using the terms "French operetta," which yielded 23 results, almost all of which were recordings. I then looked at the databases listed under the music subject guide. The databases did not appear to be useful to my search.

The Website of the [library] has a clearly visible Contact page, including information on email, telephone, in person, and chat services. According to the Contact page, the staff is available by telephone on Monday through Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm. ([library], n.d.). My call was placed at 9:15 am. After choosing from an automated menu I was immediately put in touch with a reference librarian. In a friendly tone, the librarian answered the phone by saying, "This is the reference desk. How may I help you?"

The reference librarian went silent after I told her that I was looking for books on 19th Century French operetta. (I assume she was searching the catalog.) After waiting several moments for a response, I added that I had already tried searching the library catalog online but did not achieve satisfactory results. After more silence, she said "French opera" was too general and asked me to be more specific. I told her I needed books about the French operetta style that was prevalent in the late 1800s, most notably the works of Jacques Offenbach. She came up with two results, both of which were non-circulating books in French. She then explained that the search needed to be more general, so she searched for general books on opera. The search resulted in over 2,800 books on opera. I asked what my next step should be. She said, "The catalog is not the be all and end all." After a long silence, I wondered aloud what I should do. After another silence, I asked if I should come to the library and look through all those books. Her response was, "Yeah, probably." No further response was forthcoming, so I thanked her and said goodbye.

Apart from **visibility and approachability**, this reference transaction did not meet the criteria defined by the RUSA guidelines. The librarian did not appear **interested** in the topic and did not maintain contact, often going silent without an explanation as to what she was doing. The librarian **listened** and spoke cordially and respectfully, but appeared to be going through the motions. Although she made a couple **inquiries**, she did not identify my goals, did not ask what I had already tried, and did not confirm that she understood my question. The reference librarian explained her search terms only after being prompted. She did not develop an effective **search** strategy beyond what any patron could have done with the online search tool. The librarian did not acknowledge

that the results were far too unwieldy to be of any use and did not conclude the interview with an appropriate **follow-up**. There were no suggestions about how to choose among the list of results, no referrals to a more knowledgeable librarian, and no encouragement to return with any further questions.

I was very disappointed in this reference interview because the librarian did not seem to care about my query and did not provide me with helpful suggestions. I did not receive the skilled answer that I had hoped for. The reference librarian did not determine why I needed the books, and did not vet the sources by checking the tables of contents, indexes, prefaces, or excerpts (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 41). She exhibited avoidance, possibly due to her lack of expertise in the subject (p. 43). I was particularly mystified by her comment that "the catalog is not the be all and end all." Does that mean that the library's collection contains sources that are not in the catalog? Does that mean that there are other search tools? If so, what are they, and why did she not use them? Based on this reference transaction, I would not use the telephone reference service again or recommend it to anyone else.

If I were the reference librarian in this situation, I would have asked the patron more about the purpose for the research. I would have determined whether she was writing a paper, if she was involved in a production or a performance, or if there was some other motivation behind the research. I would have asked if the client needed examples of operas, composers, or current or original productions, or if she was more interested in a general overview of the style, its place in the development of the opera form, or in modern day productions in this genre. Did she really need books, or would articles, photos, videos, recordings, analyses, or production reviews be more helpful? I

would have asked if she were able to come to the main branch of the library, if she needed materials sent to another branch, or if she required electronic resources. This would have helped narrow the search. I would have focused on French opera composers, the operetta or opera bouffe styles, or the works of Jacques Offenbach (whom I had mentioned in the interview). I would have explained my search strategy to the patron instead of going silent. I would have provided the patron with a reasonable number of resources from which to choose. I would have narrowed down the resources by looking through the tables of contents, indexes, prefaces, or excerpts (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 41), and then called the patron back. If I were unable to provide a manageable list of resources, I would have referred the patron to a librarian who had expertise in music. Finally, I would have encouraged the client to return with any further questions or information needs.

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Virtual Reference Transaction Analysis

I emailed the reference librarians at the [city 1] Public Library and at [city 2] Public Library to ask for information regarding English language periodicals focusing on opera, along with their subscription prices. The purpose of this request was to evaluate the library's virtual email reference services using measurable criteria defined in the general guidelines of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) for behavior performance in reference services, as well as specific guidelines for virtual reference services. The behavioral guidelines cover five main areas including Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up, and provide specifics for remote reference services (RUSA, 2013). RUSA guidelines for implementing and maintaining virtual services that will be analyzed involve the Provision of virtual reference services (RUSA, 2004).

I contacted two libraries, [city 1] and [city 2], so that I would have a back up in case one failed to respond. Since both responded, I will compare the email reference services provided by each library. I had decided in advance that I was creating a website geared toward opera singers. On my website, I wished to include a list of periodicals that would be of interest to site users. I expected the reference librarians to direct me to a bibliographic resource such as *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory,* which was mentioned by Cassell & Hiremath (2013, p. 63). This is a skilled answer, where "the right sources are located, sifted and judged so that only the best sources are selected for research consumption" (p. 40). I found an online version, *Ulrichsweb*, at the King Library. After a quick search using the term "opera," I came up with 24 results. This would have been a suitable list of periodicals for my purposes.

The RUSA (2004) guidelines require links to email reference services "be designed to catch the attention of potential patrons and to clearly communicate the nature of the service" (3.2.5 Parameters of Service). Submitting a question for an email response is relatively easy for both libraries. The website of the [city 1] has a clearly visible *Ask A Librarian* page, including information on email, telephone, text, and IM services. According to the *Ask A Librarian* page, the email service is suited to quick questions, which are defined as brief and factual. The service also provides "suggestions on sources available in the library or on the Internet to answer more lengthy or involved questions" ([city 1], n.d.). Responses are to be expected within 36-48 hours or less on weekdays. Telephone or in-person service is recommended for quick responses. Booking an appointment with a librarian is recommended for in-depth assistance. The page clearly states that questions regarding library accounts and renewals will not be answered by the email reference service. This follows the RUSA (2004) guidelines that recommend that the "level of service to be provided should be defined and announced" (3.2.1 Parameters of Service). An email reference service link leads to a web form, which asks for the patron's name, email address, and question. Patrons are asked to be as explicit as possible, provide date and context limitations, and to include information about research done on the question. (LAPL, n.d.) The email reference service at the [city 2] is more challenging to locate. The main navigation menu contains a *Get Help* link, which has a secondary menu with link to a contact page. The *Contact Us* page provides links to various services, including email reference. Clicking on the "Email" link leads to a web form for submitting a question. Questions are not restricted to certain types. ([city 2], n.d.)

I immediately received an automated response from the [city 2], along with a question ID and password, and a link to check on the status of my question. The [city 1] did not provide an automated response. The [city 2] took 10 hours to provide their final response, while the [city 1] took 28 hours. Both fell within the response times announced on the websites (RUSA, 2004, 3.2.4 Parameters of time). Responses from both services were cordial and brief. I did not get the sense that either of the librarians who responded was approachable. The language used in the emails seems curt, and indicates to me that further communication was not anticipated. (RUSA, 2013, 1.0 Visibility/Approachability)

The [city 1] librarian understood my information need and directed me to an appropriate resource. The web form requests users to explain the question as specifically as possible, identify date and context limitations, describe what they already know and where they have already searched. In this way, the librarian clarified the question and was able to direct my search. (RUSA, 2013, 3.0 Listening/Inquiring) An indication of the librarian's interest in the topic lies in the fact that she took the time to read and understand my request. (RUSA, 2013, 2.0 Interest) The [city 1] email response is the one I had expected. It contains a link to *Ulrichsweb*, which is a skilled answer (Cassell & Hiremouth, 2013, p. 40). The librarian explained that the directory was searchable after signing in with a library card. She did not provide further instruction as to how to search the directory. (RUSA, 2013, 4.0 Searching)

The initial response from the [city 2] referred me to the Music Division of the Library of Performing Arts. It seems to me that this librarian was not listening or interested (RUSA, 2013, 3.0 Listening/Inquiring). If she had taken the time to reflect on

my query, she would have understood that there was no need to refer me to a music library. The reference librarian in the Music Division of the [city 2] Library of Performing Arts replied, " We are sorry, but we do not have a master list like that, and compiling such lists is not a service we provide." She apparently misinterpreted my question, which could have been answered very easily by referring me to *Ulrichsweb*. Instead, she advised me to conduct a Journal Title search of the library's catalog "using keywords such as 'opera' etc." She also provided a link to the library's *Articles & Databases Page*, with no explanation of what type of resources it contains or how it is searched. It seems to me that there was no effort to identify efficient search techniques (RUSA, 2013, 4.0 Searching). This behavior of avoidance is possibly explained by the librarian being faced with "a seemingly impenetrable question" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 43) or by "not knowing the reference collection" (p. 44). The email contained several grammatical errors, which added to the unfavorable impression.

The [city 1] librarian did not encourage me to contact the library again with any further questions. The [city 2] librarian wrote, "Please let me know if you have any further questions" (without a period at the end of the sentence). It is clear to me that, in light of her avoidance and failed response to my query, this statement was an empty formality. (RUSA, 2013, 5.0 Follow-up)

I am satisfied by the [city 1] email reference service. According to the RUSA guidelines, [city 1] could have done a better job as far as approachability, instruction, and follow up (RUSA, 2013). If I were the reference librarian in this case, I would have used friendly language, provided more instruction on search techniques, and made sure the

patron felt comfortable to return with further questions. These factors, however, do not affect my satisfaction with the answer I received.

I am appalled by the [city21. I lived in [city 2] for many years and have spent many hours at the Performing Arts Library at [name] Center, which is excellent. I expected top-notch service. If even I, a student with three weeks of experience in an introductory Reference Services class, can identify an appropriate resource for my query, why is it that not one, but *two* [city 2] reference librarians did not consider *Ulrich's* or something similar? Although the infrastructure for virtual reference is clearly in place, the two [city 2] librarians involved in my query do not appear committed to providing quality service.

Based on these experiences, I would use email reference services for simple questions that do not require expediency. This style of communication does not lend itself to complicated research, or to instruction. I would not depend on one library for an adequate answer, due to my disappointing transaction with [city 2], a respected and prestigious library that failed to provide an adequate answer to a simple question.

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