Reference Service Evaluation

Face-to-Face Interview

Digital Services Interviews: Email & Chat

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the face-to-face reference interview and services provided by the El Segundo Public Library in El Segundo, California to M.L.I.S. student Alison Leonard who played the role of the library patron. Additionally, the paper discusses said student’s experience in submitting email questions to the Manhattan Beach Public Library, part of the County of Los Angeles Public Library system, and a chat session with the Seattle Public Library system to obtain reference information to questions. This paper summaries the student experience and outcomes and the library performance in each situation.
For the face-to-face interview I chose the El Segundo Public Library (ESPL), which serves the community I live in for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I wanted to see what the experience would be like with a somewhat small independent library in a rather wealthy community. ESPL is an independent library under the City of El Segundo and is not a part of the County of Los Angeles Public Library System. ESPL is part of the Southern California Library Cooperative (formerly MCLS) whose mission is to enhance the resources of independent libraries through cooperative services to better serve their local library users. Thirty three independent city and special district public libraries are members. Secondly, I wanted to see what the experience would be like since I knew the reference library staff as I was employed as a page at one point with the library. Would they treat me with the same level of professionalism as any other patron I wondered?

I asked questions pertaining to my upcoming Pathfinder assignment. They were:

1. I am preparing a Pathfinder on the U.S. national park system and I would like to see some examples of Pathfinders.

2. I would like to get input on source materials for the Pathfinder I am preparing on U.S. national parks that you think would make sense.

In asking these questions I hoped to obtain a physical example of a Pathfinder. Librarian X provided with a one-sheet Pathfinder she had prepared on Elvis Presley, of whom she is a fan. She took time to explain to me that a Pathfinder is simply as additional tool for the librarian and patron, one the patron can walk away with that reflects the materials available at that library and the database services in which they subscribe to. She satisfied my first request by providing me
with a sample Pathfinder. My second question was more involved as I was looking for sources. Librarian X took the time to discuss sources throughout the library that would be useful including the reference section, the 900 books related to travel, encyclopedias and databases that might be useful. She even arose from her desk and walked me to the computer to help me with the library catalog. Additionally, she showed me how to access the databases ESPL subscribes to, and took time to help me conduct a search on GALE, a databases of magazine index and articles and electronic reference books.

Our textbook (Bopp & Smith, 2001) recommend that the reference interview start with the question, “How can I help you?” While this is good advice. I went about things in a slightly different way. I emailed the library earlier in the day giving them a heads up that I had questions on preparing a Pathfinder thus they were somewhat prepared before my arrival. Librarian X followed the Interviewing Principals described in our text (Bopp & Smith, 2001). Her verbal techniques were excellent. She smiled and greeted me, she listened and showed an interest, she took my questions seriously, she asked questions until she fully understood what I needed, and she invited me to return if I needed more help. Her non-verbal behavior was kind, eager, engaged and professional as well as prompt email communication. I did not see any behavior that I would be leery about adopting, in fact if was quite the contrary. When I arrived at the time we agreed on via email, Librarian X continued a successful reference interview by using the “walking technique,” asking open-ended questions, encouraging questions, remaining neutral, and actively listening to me. She did not ask me “why” since I had described in the email that my questions were for a school paper. I found the whole experience successful and pleasant and thought she successfully mirrored Bopp & Smith’s reference interview techniques. I thought that perhaps I would be treated in more causal way since I was a former employee; however, this was not the
case. I was granted the same level of professional and sincerity that any other patron would experience I felt. Almost all of the sources provided were useful. This was due, in part, to the fact that I had crafted and emailed the questions I would ask beforehand so that useful information could be attained during our interaction in all likelihood. One piece of information provided was a referral to the guidebook collection. As my Pathfinder assignment will not reflect this collection in this specific library, I could not include those books.

The library is quiet, clean, bright and cheerful. The reference desk sits in near the center of the library and is not visible from the entrance. The reference librarian is somewhat obstructed by a large wrap around counter that may be difficult for some patrons to see over. It is difficult to determine if the reference librarian is available to help you as you approach because you cannot see him/her as you approach, with the exception of the top of their head.

RUSA Guidelines reflect strategies for behavioral performance. They include approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching and follow up. Librarian X succeeded in every standard set by RUSA. No outside or environmental factors played a role in our interaction. No other users approached the reference desk and any other concerns or ongoing tasks or reason for interruption was made known to me.

In closing I found this assignment satisfying and beneficial in that real information was delivered to me that I can use going forward with another assignment related to this course (Pathfinder). It is hard to turn a critical eye based on the experience I had.

**Digital Services Interviews: Email Reference Service Evaluation**

On Thursday, July 2, 2009 at 3:49 PM I sent the following questions to the Manhattan Beach Public Library (County of Los Angeles Public Library system) Web site entitled, *Ask a Librarian:*
“I am writing a paper about different ways to access sources and information on the U.S. national Park system? Can you provide me with my online links, as well as reference materials?”

I received this pop up response after submitting my question:

Thank you for your question. We will respond within 48 hours (excluding weekends and holidays).

You can also contact your local library or any open library for assistance, including getting a PIN. For a listing of our community libraries, click here

In addition, frequently asked questions and answers are available here

Reference Services
County of Los Angeles Public Library
referenceservices@library.lacounty.gov
www.colapublib.org

The site said the library would be closed Friday, July 3 and Saturday, July 4. Since email response excludes weekends and holidays, I expect to hear back as late as Monday, July 6. At 5:30 PM on the same day, approximately 1½ hours after sending my email inquiry I received the following from County of Los Angeles Public Library:

Dear Alison-

Thank you for contacting the County of Los Angeles Public Library asking about accessing online sources and information about the U.S. National Park System as well as reference materials. Your question was received in a centralized reference unit.

In searching online, I did a Google search using two search terms which were similar, but produced different results. The first search was "U S National parks" which resulted in over one billion websites. The second search was "national parks us" which yielded 185 million results. There was some duplication in both searches; however, there were some different records as well.

Depending on the type of information you are looking for, I found that results varied from the
overall park system information to websites on individual national parks or monuments.

I have included two links for you to take a look at. The first is related to finding a park which has links to information for a particular park. The second link is from Wikipedia which is a list of all the national parks and monuments in which decommissioned parks and monuments are included for the U.S. National Park System with links to each one on the list.

http://www.nps.gov/FINDAPARK

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_areas_in_the_United_States_National_Park_System

The County of Los Angeles Public Library catalog indicates that there are numerous books and videos on the National Parks System which also includes individual parks. Here is a link to the Library website: http://www.colapublib.org/.

Additionally, there is a website that will take you to a world wide catalog that will let you search for national parks that will result in books and other materials outside the County of Los Angeles Public Library system. http://www.worldcat.org/

I hope this information is helpful to you in writing your paper and I would like to thank you for contacting the County of Los Angeles Public Library with your question.

Regards,

Librarian Y
Reference Services Librarian
County of Los Angeles Public Library

I was impressed with the detail of the response as well as how rapidly it came and how personalized it was. The email contained four recommended sources, but I did not find any of them provided information that could not be uncovered in a simple search by just about anyone online on their own. I was surprised that Librarian Y started his search on Google.com. Almost any patron would have done this on their own. Additionally, I expected different sources that were outside the expected norm from library reference. I found it comical that Librarian Y spent time comparing returns from Google that numbered over one billion with returns that numbered
185 million (see his response). No reference interview was conducted as you can see by the
response.

One of the benefits of the electronic response was that everything could take place from
my home. This saved me time, gas money, irritation of traffic, and perhaps a greater confidence
level in that I was an invisible user. The negative side was that the Librarian Y did not have an
understanding about my degree of knowledge surrounding accessing information. Questions that
may have been better suited could be an initial response such as “What information do you
currently have?” and “Why types of sources/formats would you like me to research?” or “Is there
specific subject matter you want regarding the parks?”

The sources that were recommended to me were the national park service homepage and
the Wikipedia Web site on national parks. Some of the unique elements of an email encounter
are that there is no way to gage verbal and non-verbal cues, as one would be able to do in a face-
to-face interaction. I also have no understanding about how busy this individual is. He/she may
be single-handedly responsible for responding to hundreds of queries daily from patrons, and
indeed, from around the world. Questions best suited for the digital environment are probably
asking questions directly related to the catalog at the particular library you are contacting.
Librarian Y did take time to send a response that was professional and courteous, and based on
the length of the response; I feel that he did spend some time on it. However, I do not think that
the sources were creative.

Jana Roan’s article, The Reference Interview Online, was written specifically for the chat
session, although there was relevant material pertaining to an email interaction. Some cross over
includes: quick response, acknowledgement of the question and greeting the user by name.
Librarian Y met all of these criteria. The RUSA “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of
Reference and Information Service Professionals” suggests the following when dealing with a remote user, “provide prominent, jargon-free links to all forms of reference services from the home page of the library's Web site, and throughout the site wherever research assistance may be sought out. The Web should be used to make reference services easy to find and convenient.” Additionally, recommendations for the remote user pertaining to an email interaction are, “Acknowledges user email questions in a timely manner. States question-answering procedures and policies clearly in an accessible place on the Web. This should indicate question scope, types of answers provided, and expected turnaround time.” In the case of the Los Angeles County Library system I would make the following comments in relation to the RUSA Behavioral Guidelines. The library Web site did a good job of not using jargon and making it easy to find the “Ask A Librarian” link. My email was acknowledged quickly. Policies regarding follow up were displayed cleanly. The scope and types of answers was not provided, nor do I think it should be. The librarian needs to know the scope, as well as fully understanding the question, before he/she can know whether or not they can answer it.

One of the nice things about an email session is that environmental concerns are of little influence. If there were concerns it is impossible for me to know what they were. I think that Librarian Y did a good job at the beginning of the email by using my name and thanking me for using the site as well as restating my question, to some degree. One change I would make would be at the end of the email which now reads, “I hope this information is helpful to you in writing your paper and I would like to thank you for contacting the County of Los Angeles Public Library with your question.” I would add something like, “New or additional questions often arise, or other questions may develop regarding your subject. Please do not hesitate to contact us
if this is the case” and/or “What other kind of questions did you have about this topic?”

Arguably, what question is ever completely answered?

**Digital Services Interviews: Chat Session Reference Service Evaluation**

On July 2 at 4:19 PM I submitted a chat question to the Seattle Public Library “Ask the Librarian Chat Form” and received this response:

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Hello Alison,

Your chat transcript with a librarian at Seattle Public Library (WA)

Date: 16:19 2009/07/02

Question ID: 4637016

Chat Transcript: I am writing a paper about different ways to access sources and information on the U.S. national Park system? Can you provide me with my online links, as well as reference materials?

[Librarian 16:20:12]: Librarian 'Seattle Public Library – Librarian Z' has joined the session.

[Librarian 16:20:17]: Hi there,

[Librarian 16:20:21]: I am reading your question right now. One second please...

[Librarian 16:20:36]: Sure.

[Librarian 16:21:28]: A good starting place for sure is the Web site for the national park service.


[Alison 16:21:45]: I know about the nps.gov Web site. Mostly I'm looking for info on recreational activities or camping info.

[Alison 16:27:41]: Are you still there?
[Librarian 16:38:38]: Yes

[Librarian 16:38:43]: Still looking

[Librarian 16:41:59]: Looks to me like on that website, if you first find a national park you are interested in writing about, you can then go to the "planyourvisit" section. This seems to provide the best details on recreational activities or camping info.

[Librarian 16:42:31]: Take Olympic National Park for example.


[Librarian 16:42:56]: I am also happy to find you other resources.

[Librarian 16:44:26]: Have a look at this list of books in our collection and let me know if I am on the right track:

[Librarian 16:44:28]:

[https://catalog.spl.org/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=R246578E964F2.19291&profile=cen&uindex=S\W&term=%22National%20parks%20and%20reserves%20--%20United%20States%20--%20Directories.%22&aspect=subtab14&menu=search&source=~!horizon#focus](https://catalog.spl.org/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=R246578E964F2.19291&profile=cen&uindex=S\W&term=%22National%20parks%20and%20reserves%20--%20United%20States%20--%20Directories.%22&aspect=subtab14&menu=search&source=~!horizon#focus)

[Librarian 16:47:59]: I hope this helps.

[Alison 16:53:03]: You're great. Thanks for all your hard work.

[Librarian 16:53:12]: Any time.

[Librarian 16:53:17]: :)

[Librarian 16:53:25]: Thank you for using chat.

[Librarian 16:59:18]: Librarian ended chat session.

Please take a moment to fill out a survey at:

Much like the email exchange I had with the Los Angeles County Library I was pleased with the quick and kind response, however, I was not pleased with the predictable response by referring me to the national park service Web site. In this case, I pushed back that I already knew about the national park service Web site and was hoping for new information. Instead he pushed back too and suggested a separate section on the same site entitled, “Plan Your Visit”. I thought that was a cop out. And since I said I knew about the National Park Service Web site, would not there be a good chance that I would know about the “Plan Your Visit” link on that site? He showed a willingness to look for other sources, but only suggested the library catalog rather than specific materials. “Chat is an austere mode of communication, where there are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language and little if no visual or spatial environment as a context of meaning” (Ronan p. 43). This was probably a good thing in this case because I am not sure how I would have reacted in a face-to-face encounter if I had told the reference librarian that I was already familiar with the Web site they were recommending and they continued to push it on me. This interaction did follow what Ronan says about chat communication, “Even in one-on-one situations, communiqués are best kept brief. This is because it is hard to read comments longer than two lines, and because the recipient experiences dead time while long messages are being composed” (Ronan, p. 43). Communication was kept short, and you can tell by our interaction that I was confused about whether or not I had been dropped from session. After several minutes I once asked, “Are you still there?” No reference interview was conducted. I highlighted some of the benefits of online interaction above in the email section of this paper. Another is that you can get an even more instantaneous response than email with chat. Ronan’s article makes an interesting point “While any question can be asked in chat, not every question is best answered there” (Ronan, p. 47). The article did a good job of pointing out that just because
a user and a librarian are in a chat session, the user might not be in a rush. I did somehow feel as if I needed to rush. I give the librarian at the Seattle Public Library credit for sticking with me for more than a 20 minute period to research my question, it was just his results that I was not please with. Some of the negatives I feel in the electronic service environment is that the librarian does not have to dig much, because they are “hidden”. There is no face-to-face encounter that exposes them. Good examples of questions that I think are best suited for a digital environment are referrals to government resources as well as community resources.

The Ronan article made several suggestions for the reference interview including:

1. Quick response time-Check.
2. Warm reception/welcome-I was told Librarian Z had joined that session, but no other welcome was made.
3. Attempt to personalize interaction-No, that did not happen.
4. A show of interest that he understood by using responses such as “I understand”-He seemed to understand, but he did not interview me or dig.
5. Since little can be understood about the user a librarian can use all the “question techniques” in their repertoire-This mean the librarian can take longer and dig deeper since non-verbal communication is not an issue. This did not happen, if fact, I received push back when I told the librarian I already knew about the source they suggested.

Searching to meet patron’s timeframe-Librarian Z did not inquiere about my timeframe, which could have resulted in a more comprehensive search and reporting back to me later with additional sources.
6. Sound understanding of references sources-this is a mandate for the employee from the employer. It is impossible for me to know if Librarian Z meets the library standard in my limited chat session.

7. Follow up. “Does this answer your question?” model-“I hope this helps” was the closing I received. No future offer was help was extended.

The RUSA “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Professionals” were met by providing jargon-free links on the Web site home page. Maintaining "word contact" with the patron did not always happen. I left wondering if communication had been dropped twice. All my questions were acknowledged in a timely manner. Finding the “Ask a librarian chat form” on the Seattle Public Library Web site was a real challenge. It was very hidden. They are not promoting its use. The scope of answers was not provided on the site.

Just like the situation with my email encounter, I can not know if outside factors or environmental concerns made an impact on our interaction. This is one of the benefits of online interaction. I am disinterested in other concerns they may have, I simply want my question answered.
References


