Group 5 - The Reference Librarian as Instructor: How does the reference transaction become a teachable moment?

Discussion Leaders – Catherine Cardwell & Kelly Broughton (BGSU)
17 people attended

We began by discussing if there were libraries, other than BGSU, who are required to articulate student learning outcomes and to report on the assessment of these outcomes. No others in the group were currently required to do this. We discussed briefly how BGSU librarians assess student learning in course-integrated library instruction by pre- and post-testing, analysis of student research papers and other methods.

It was generally agreed upon that the reference transaction can present the ideal situation for teaching, because it can often be at the exact moment when students are ready to learn, i.e. they have an immediate information need (as opposed to library orientation or even course-integrated library instruction).

We also discussed the times when the reference transaction is the less than ideal teachable moment – when students resist learning and want only answers, when students don’t understand the difference between the mission of their academic library and that of the public library. This led to some discussion of students seeking help from nearby public libraries and how the public librarians react to that. One attendee reported that they have meetings with their local public librarians.

Most of our discussion centered on what makes the teachable moment and how that might be different using chat as a medium for reference. One concern pointed out in this discussion was the scavenger-hunt type assignment that sometimes presents itself at the reference desk. Another concern was the assignment-related reference questions that required the use of certain resources or research methods that local librarians may be immediately aware of through experience, but that may take time for a non-local librarian to ferret out and how that could be best handled in a statewide service. It is hoped that the listserv that will be available for all librarians participating in the statewide digital reference service will be used to make all participating librarians aware of specific assignments and potentially repetitive questions.

It was also pointed out that the approach a librarian may take to teaching often depends on the status of the patron. The approach to teaching a faculty member could be vastly different than the approach to teaching an undergraduate. Librarians in the group representing different universities who already have experience providing reference services over chat reported that they ask the patrons to identify their status as they log into the service and that this does provide assistance to the librarians on how they approach the transaction.

It was suggested that we consider asking a few more questions at the opening of the transaction to assist with the reference interview. One librarian suggested we consider something like the types of questions on the forms we asked patrons to complete before performing mediated searching on Dialog. This could speed up the interview process and help with some of the assignment concerns.

We could include questions like:
Is this for an assignment?
If so, for what course?
Can you briefly describe the assignment?
Do you want or are you required to use specific resources, formats or databases?
What have you already tried?

It was also pointed out that this helps the students to think, focus and articulate their questions without the pressure of a face-to-face interview.

We also discussed how we should be talking about reference on our campuses and in our libraries. How much of the reference work we do is service? How much is instruction? Should our mission with digital reference be service or instruction, or some mixture of both? Should/Will it be different than in-person reference? Does it help administrators and classroom faculty to better understand and/or appreciate our contributions to student learning if we consistently speak of our work as a “service?”

Finally, one of the more interesting peripheral things that came up (thanks mostly to having four group members from three different institutions with experience providing chat reference) was that it is very beneficial for a chat reference librarian to practice or have experience being a “patron” on chat.