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Process, Practice, and Psychic Stress at the Reference Desk

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Practical Magic

In *The Social Life of Information*, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid make the distinction between “process” and “practice.” Process, crudely put, is what you’re supposed to do: breaking a task down into its parts, following standard approved methods. If you can fit it into a flowchart or present it in Microsoft Powerpoint, it’s probably process. Practice, on the other hand, is what we really do, especially when process breaks down and life throws a curveball that the technical writers did not anticipate. For Brown and Duguid, practice is Xerox technicians meeting before and after official working hours to shoot the bull and share all the unofficial knowledge they’ve gained through trial and error:

Though only a fraction may involve directly informing others about explicit business matters, this talk is valuable. Chat continuously but almost imperceptibly adjusts a group’s collective knowledge and individual member’s awareness of each other. (Brown, Duguid, 2000)

In reference work, process is what you learn in library school: conduct a thorough reference interview; use plenty of open-ended questions; refine the topic until you can identify the one resource that will have exactly the right information. Measure twice, cut once and all that. These are powerful tools, and allow us to successfully research topics of which we have little or no previous knowledge. Powerful tools have limits, however. If you’re designing or building a car, you will want sophisticated 3-D modeling programs and robotics. If you eventually lock your keys in said car, all that technology will not help you as much as a wire coat hanger.

Similarly, I find that a significant proportion of my reference work falls into the gaps that the orthodox reference “process” does not cover, leaving me to

improvise a form of “practice” that owes more to intuition, environmental scanning, networks (both social and neural), and sheer luck rather than to the theories of Dewey and Ranganathan. A basic tenet of my “practice” is best expressed by the ALA “Read” poster featuring the characters from Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: “Read Everything — Just in Case.”

Random Access Memory

I call this the Cliff Clavin method of knowledge management, after the loquacious mailman from the show *Cheers*. Go through life filling one’s head with seemingly “useless” trivia, then disgorge this information whenever it seems relevant. My mind works a little bit like the system that Google uses to place relevant ads beside Web searches, newspaper articles, and in their new Gmail service. While the conscious part of my mind pays attention to what a patron is saying, and goes through the standard operating procedures, my unconscious (I’ll call him Harvey) runs through the back corridors of my mind, through all sorts of dusty old objects that seemed too good to throw away, even though there was no obvious use for them at the time. Then Harvey finds a long-ignored fact that somehow relates to the topic at hand, which I never would have come up with by the normal means, or at least not so quickly.

Attention to the Devil in the Details

Once, a patron asked if he could find out if a book he had requested was in transit yet. I punched in his number and saw two items on his holds list: *Driven to Distraction* and *You Mean I’m not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?*

As a connoisseur of the psychiatry section (616.8...) I recognized both of these titles as popular works on attention deficit disorder. I wouldn’t normally comment on someone’s choices, especially on a potentially sensitive subject. I told him



Driven to Distraction was in transit, and he asked me when I thought it would arrive. The current screen didn't show the date the book was sent into transit, so I had to go back to the main search page and look up the title. None of the copies of the book showed as being in transit. I went back to the title list and saw the ADD book by Hallowell and Ratey, and the audio version. There was also a video with the same name; not a documentary at all, but a BBC mystery miniseries. Indeed, the mystery video was the one he had put on hold. While there is no reason why someone might not simultaneously want one leading book on ADD and a movie that happened to have the title of another primary source, it seemed like a coincidence that would have made J. K. Rowling blush.

At this point I thought it worthwhile to bring up the subject of his research, and ask if indeed he wanted a mystery that happened to have the same title as one of the most popular books on the subject of his other research. He laughed and said, no, he didn't want a movie, and I placed a hold on the correct item. It was a simple mistake, the kind of thing people do every day, but it seemed especially easy for someone placing a hold on a book about ADD.

This is the kind of service that I can provide, thanks to the wide variety of arcana that sticks to my brain like flypaper. It also makes me feel a little better about the useful things I don't remember, because I can say that even though I forgot to change my oil or pick up soy milk at the store, the factoid that displaced a more pragmatic detail did come in handy.

Certainly, my stream of consciousness doesn't always buoy up just the right bit of flotsam to solve the problem of the moment. At these times, one falls back on the standard operating procedures of reference service, which allow us to research subjects we know little or nothing about. I know that other people will be able to call on different sources of tacit

knowledge that they have gathered throughout their lives, even if their internal databases might not seem like quite as much of a crazyquilt as mine.

Death and the Maiden

In their book *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day present their concept of the reference librarian as "information therapist":

One of the most valuable (and unheralded) services librarians provide is to help clients understand their own needs—a kind of information therapy. Interacting with a reference librarian can be very much like going to a good psychotherapist who, through skillful questioning, gets you to talk about what's really bothering you. (Nardi, O'Day, 1999)

I agree with Nardi and O'Day. Especially in today's increasingly fragmented and alienating world, sometimes our patrons need the sense that a human being is listening, as much as they need the kind of faceless, context-free facts, which they could get from Ask Jeeves. My experience as a journalist has been invaluable when it comes to finding just the right questions to draw forth what someone needs to say, and has served me well on many occasions.

This is not the story of one of those occasions.

A tall, laconic woman came up to the desk. In retrospect, I realize that she was developmentally disabled, though it was not obvious at first. She asked a question that must rank among the most baffling ever faced by a reference librarian:

"Do you have anything on that gal who died?"

My mind raced. I stifled a scream. Who could she mean? I couldn't think of any recent celebrity deaths. The tragedy of the space shuttle Columbia had recently taken





Caprichos Plate 43: *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*—Francisco Goya (1746–1828)

place. Was there a woman on board, one like the teacher, Krista McCauliffe, who touched our hearts when she flew on the Challenger back in 1986? My mind went into spin cycle as I considered the enormity of this question. A bit more than half of humanity could be reasonably classified under the rubric of “gals.” With the exception of those still alive, all of them have died. Who could she mean? Marie Curie? Marie Antoinette? Mary Magdalene? Typhoid Mary? Selena? Messalina? Madame de Stäel? Karen Silkwood? Nina Simone?

All this frenzied cogitation flashed by in an instant; my mind is never quite so sprightly as when it calculates the hopelessness of a difficult situation. I know that the official way to proceed in this situation is to ask open-ended questions that will help the reader focus the scope of the information

need. With a question this broad, not to mention a patron who thought the question reasonable, it would be a challenge to get into the right county, let alone the right ballpark. Perhaps she needed an information therapist. I know I needed a therapist at that moment, or perhaps a mild sedative.

I’m not normally a praying man, but I sent a silent shout-out to any higher power that might be listening. Please, please, let her give me something to work with. Jesus, Allah, Ahura Mazda, Cthulu... I was willing to take a hint from anywhere I could get one. What happened next may have been the result of a *deus ex machina*, or just the normal workings of the patron’s own random access memory. She opened her mouth and said...

“Anne Frank.”

Ah! That gal who died! How could I have missed it? I thanked whatever deity, demon or demiurge moved her to speak, and went about the straightforward business of finding something about Anne Frank.

At the time, it was one of those benignly maddening situations that made me feel as though I was working not in a library, but in a James Thurber story. In retrospect, I see that this event highlighted Duguid and Brown’s trifecta of practice: collaboration, narration, and improvisation. (Brown, Duiguid, 2000)

I told several of my coworkers about this in the back room. It was the kind of story that begged to be repeated, and also the sort of encounter that must be converted into narrative to take away its stress-inducing power. Didn’t Karl Marx say that reference service repeats itself, the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce? (He should have known, considering how much time he spent in London’s National Museum.)

The next day, I got a lesson in the value of information sharing, and realized that my act of narration had also been a kind of collaboration. A colleague told me about her visit from one of our regulars,



whom I will call Nadine. Nadine topped out at just under five feet, but her energy and enthusiasm ensured that she would never go unnoticed—the sort of boundlessly cheery developmentally disabled adult who always keeps things, um, interesting. She came up to the counter and asked my co-worker, “Do you have anything about that gal who died?”

Dawn didn’t miss a beat. Like a jazz musician who has the right riff for any occasion burned into her muscle memory—jazz as the apotheosis of tacit knowledge could be a study in itself—she was able to improvise the perfect response:

“You mean Anne Frank?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” the patron replied, as though she had asked a completely normal, one-answer question, something like “Who’s the secretary of defense?” or “What’s the latest *Left Behind* book?”

Shortly thereafter, I saw my “gal who died” patron hanging around with Nadine, and I knew that they had been doing some collaboration of their own.

This episode demonstrates the overlapping roles that even a single communication act can play in the workplace. I shared a funny story with my co-workers. And even this motive was mixed: While I did wish to bring pleasure to other people by making them laugh, I also wanted the ego-boost of knowing that I had the power to make people laugh. By converting the event into a kind of joke with a punchline, I was able to purge the stress that I had felt while it was happening. My self-centered and colleague-centered motives also had a benefit for the patron. I would never have predicted that my co-worker would face the same impenetrable question just one day after I did, but my intuition compelled me to share a story, and it proved to be useful knowledge.

Georg Von Krogh, Kazuo Ichijo, and Ikujiro Nonaka write that “effective knowledge creation depends on an enabling

context.” (Von Krogh, Ichijo, Nonaka, 2000) This is a powerful reason for organizations to foster a positive, collegial environment. While my co-workers and I could have performed our basic duties in the absence of an “enabling context” that encouraged us to blend reasonable socializing into the workday, this incident shows how we can augment the service we provide with the casual discourse we share on the job.

Punctuating my Equilibrium

Occasionally, my intuition delivers up an answer so quickly that I even impress myself—though sometimes I’m the only one impressed. In *The Hidden Intelligence: Innovation through Intuition*, Sandra Weintraub writes:

Some theorists believe that when this occurs, the intuitor actually does think logically, but it happens so quickly that the logic is understood only on a subconscious level and is processed instantaneously to reveal a solution. The intuitor frequently gets the answer first and then explains the logic of it, working backwards from the solution, whereas the logical thinker begins with the facts and builds on them to deduce the logical answer. (Weintraub, 1998)

I remember one time when this cognitive process was just slow enough for me to follow its convolutions. A young man approached the counter with a call slip and asked my coworker, “Where would I find 291.175 G698r?” I was feeling frisky. He was holding a book by Stephen Jay Gould, and my mind raced. He’s reading Gould, and he wants a book in the religion section by an author whose name begins with G. Someone reading one Gould book might want another, and I was sure that one, and only one, of his books was cataloged in religion.

“Were you looking for *Rock of Ages*?”
“Yeah.”



