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# Reference Redesign @ Multnomah Central Library

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**W**hat does it mean to be a specialist in a large public library? In the era of Google and a plenitude of databases on every desktop, can reference librarians confine themselves to a circumscribed subject specialty? Does a passionate interest in a subject make you an expert? And do librarians need to be subject experts, or just dogged snoops?

And what does it mean to be a generalist? Is a generalist a jack-of-all-trades and master of none? Does reference service suffer because the librarian is flailing in unfamiliar waters? Or does the wider knowledge of the generalist serve the patron with better referrals and a broader frame of reference?

These are not new questions. But at Multnomah County Library, we decided to try to answer some of them in the last two years, experimenting with a new design for reference services at our Central Library.

Twenty years ago, each MCL reference librarian had a home section, but was trained to work in other sections. In 1984, a typical reference librarian might work primarily on the Literature and History desk, but also in telephone reference, Science and Business and Government Documents.

Librarians knew a little something about everything, and consulted their more knowledgeable colleagues when needed.

Our staff was full of fanatically curious people who were encyclopedic in their knowledge of everything from opera to Oregon history. Library assistants worked on the reference desks then too, adding another layer of knowledge and experience. Formal specialization was confined to two areas: government documents and music; subjects deemed complex enough to warrant hiring specialists.

Philosophies come and go, as the pendulum swings. By 2000, the subject sections were separated almost completely,

working independently of each other, relying more on their internal resources and less on the collective knowledge of the whole staff. Librarians came to see their subject areas more as specialties, and the mixed approach withered away. Library assistants were taken off Central Library subject reference desks, and reorganized into a separate workgroup, staffing the telephone reference service and branch reference desks. Opportunities for collaboration dwindled.

At the same time, technology was changing our world at a head-spinning pace. In 1984, when I came to Multnomah County Library, there was one reference computer in the building, sitting on a little metal desk in the middle of a vast corral of card catalogs. A patron told me one day that she could tell who the librarians were by how they slammed the drawers in with either authority or panache.

We all know how dramatically the picture has changed: Web and database access on every desktop, climbing expectations from the public as the Web becomes more commonly used, and declining dependence on reference librarians and print library resources. The atmosphere of order and control has slowly disappeared. Librarians don't have the drawer-slamming certainty of their position, when it is not so clear to the public what we do. And since every desktop in the building has the same array of resources on it, how can we continue to refer our patrons all over the building for information that is electronically available? Isn't it reasonable on the part of our patrons to expect that we can use all the tools in our toolbox? Might becoming better generalists help us meet these expectations?

When reference managers at Multnomah County Library looked at these changes and an austere budget, we proposed a change in the way that we staff reference desks, based on a model that



incorporates more rotation among desks for all librarians, and that harks back to that earlier way of working. We also wanted to make better use of our deep and surprisingly wide-ranging periodicals collection. Periodicals have been isolated in a section defined only by format at Central. We wanted our subject reference staff to use the rich periodical resources, and periodicals librarians to expand their knowledge of other sources.

Here began what became known (in polite circles) as “Reference Redesign.” Some of the Multnomah Central managers began to talk more seriously about ideas that had been tossed around for years, all aimed at integrating the sections at Central and moving towards generalism. We planned cross-training for all librarians. Perhaps the most jarring change for longtime staff was a common schedule with a common set of scheduling norms. We planned to designate several librarians as generalists, to work on all reference desks and on interdisciplinary projects. We kept returning to this set of purposes:

- To move our librarian staff towards a more versatile generalism.
- To use librarians more efficiently by cross-training.
- To provide better referrals and more informed public service, especially across sections.
- To enhance the breadth of knowledge of librarians, and the variety of their work.
- Integration of the use of periodical resources with subject sections.
- To be better stewards of our resources by using staff flexibly instead of always hiring substitutes.

The plan was put into place, beginning with a round of training for all librarians in Periodicals. Discussions, sometimes heated, were held with all reference staff as the redesign was rolled out.

Two generalist positions were developed, then three; now there are four librarians who do not belong to a subject section, but who function as a team. They work in all of the subject sections, and on cross-sectional projects such as an in-house database of staff expertise, training and special grant projects. One of them is writing a new collection policy, and they are working together on a new Web guide, *The Librarian’s Guide to Portland*.

Perhaps these seem like modest reforms, but they certainly are not. To a significant number of our librarians, who are seriously devoted to the culture and collections of their subject sections, these ideas are more like Jonathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, and have been greeted with horror. Some librarians think the generalist plan promotes poor service to our patrons, and wastes the talents of experienced staff. Others enjoy the variation and the challenge of learning to do reference in unfamiliar subjects.

MCL’s new approach has not been evaluated yet; it will be when enough time has passed to make a fruitful assessment. For our librarians, much remains the same: reliance on the wide knowledge of colleagues, skillful use of the wonderful collection of the Central Library, and great loyalty to Multnomah County Library as an institution. But what remains to be seen is whether the specialist tendency of the past can easily be wedded to a new emphasis on generalism. We hope to create something that offers the best of each approach to our patrons. 

