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Do crabs have favorite colors?

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Do Crabs Have Favorite Colors?

A Look at Reference Service at a Small Library

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Over the past quarter of a century, vast numbers of support staff have been pressed into service ... at reference desks across the country. ... What remains to be debated and resolved, in my opinion, is not whether paraprofessionals should or should not be used at the reference desk—the troops have voted with their feet on that one—but rather how they may best be utilized and what can be done to assure the conditions necessary for their success.

—Larry R. Oberg

With these words, Larry Oberg raises a clear challenge to all of us who care about the role of paraprofessionals at the reference desk. I'd like to talk about my experiences doing reference work at a small, specialized academic library. I believe that staff members at small libraries grow in ways that their peers at larger institutions do not simply because they have nobody to fall back on. My experiences describe one approach to using paraprofessionals, and I hope these observations will be useful to others.

Background

I'd like to begin by explaining my situation. I'm a Library Technician III at the Guin

Library at the Hatfield Marine Science Center on the central Oregon coast. The Guin Library is Oregon State University's only branch library. The main and branch libraries are 56 miles apart, a degree of separation common for marine libraries. Our library is small but active. We have 2.5 FTE permanent staff and about .5 FTE student workers. Our collection is small, around 28,000 volumes with about 300 active serial subscriptions. The Guin Library serves Oregon State University staff and students, federal and state agencies located at the center, and the nearby Oregon Coast Aquarium. Our core constituency is diverse but primarily concerned with marine science issues.

I came to the Guin Library seven years ago, after more than nine years of experience in the serials department at our main library, the William Jasper Kerr Library in Corvallis. I'm the interlibrary loan clerk, the serials control clerk and the binding clerk. I assist in supervising circulation and shelving. Before we added a half-time technician, I also did the accounting and resource sharing with our main library. I have always had plenty to do without helping with reference, but I found myself doing it.

The Trials

At first, I only dealt with reference questions when the librarian was gone. And she was gone a lot. During the first six months, she was gone for six weeks. As the only other staff person, I was responsible for "keeping things going in her absence." I was unaware that she was nearing the end of a period of remission from cancer and was packing the experiences of a lifetime into the time she had left. After my first six months, we picked up a temporary half-time librarian, which was a blessing because the cancer came back, and the librarian died that year. In so small a department so great a loss had a huge impact. My first eighteen months on the job were a difficult and painful time. Despite it all, I would not trade that time, because I count myself lucky to have worked with a great librarian and an



extraordinary human being.

Needless to say, I never attended a formal training session on reference. I believe this is called the throw-her-in-and-see-if-she-floats theory of orientation. We reviewed what happened during the librarian's absence, so at least I got the benefit of hindsight. One of the few disadvantages I can think of to working in a small library is that the learning environment is not rich. In a large department, information is exchanged all the time: It's almost a background noise. You model, you pick up things from your peers. But I didn't have any peers, and because the librarian was gone so much, the one-on-one attention that normally would have made up for environmental deficiencies was often unavailable. I did learn, but the process was slower than it would have been with training.

One thing I needed to learn about was the referral. A major objection to using support staff at the reference desk is the complaint that "paraprofessionals often do not make referrals or do not recognize when to make referrals to a professional. ... Other librarians believe that paraprofessionals can be so eager to help that they will not refer to or consult with a librarian" (McDaniel, 1993). I want to be honest now and say that I did these things. I have to admit that I did spend hours I couldn't really spare trying to answer questions I probably should not have tackled. I was untrained, alone, and desperate to prove myself. Just as I had to learn to identify the best tool to use in answering a question, I had to learn how to identify the best person to answer it. Another way I overcompensated in those early days was to drown the patron in information, out of a need to prove I could do the work. As I gained familiarity with the collection, learned to use our library's reference tools, and experienced success in helping patrons, my insecurity diminished, and so did the overkill. I got better at conducting reference interviews and at identifying

librarians and researchers to refer appropriate questions to. I came to see that placing a good referral was as much a mark of my professionalism as answering the question myself.

I suspect that many people starting reference work experience the anxiety and insecurity that I felt. I was seeking what some psychologists call "self-efficacy," a belief in my ability to perform a specific task, in this case, frontline reference service. If supervising librarians want to minimize these natural overcompensatory behaviors in support staff, then I believe they should provide systematic feedback to paraprofessionals, and create a work environment rich in learning resources such as orientation programs, desk manuals, and subject-oriented workshops.

Maturing

In speaking honestly about how my performance at the reference desk suf-

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ferred from a lack of training, I don't want to imply that I came to the desk with empty hands. I had college credits in geology and botany and other coursework in invertebrate zoology. I had collected fossils for fifteen years, and been a birder for almost as long. My personal library contains many of the standard works on the natural history and history of the region. And I had nine years of invaluable experience at our main library. I was familiar with the workflow and the personnel there and could provide better general service because I was cross-trained in the work of many departments.

The review process has helped me feel better about my performance. A review is not the best way to initiate training, but it works in a small library after the staff is trained. To this day, the librarian is often gone one or two days a week, and we have to work at keeping each other up-to-date. When the librarian is absent for extended periods, I keep a running FYI file in my computer. I consult with her, telling her what happened during her absence, and she makes recommendations on how to handle ongoing situations. We meet once a week for team meetings at which we share information. An advantage to working in a small library is that the staff gets more one-on-one interaction with the librarian, and in a one-librarian library, you don't worry about getting mixed signals from different supervisors.

Another factor that helped me mature as a worker was the environment. My supervisors were remarkably patient with me as I learned, and they set great examples of a high standard of service. When I was one member of a crowded department at the main library, I didn't really know what librarians did or what was expected of them. In my current position, I've been fortunate to work under two remarkable librarians. The closer I've gotten, the more my respect has grown. I can't help thinking that some of the distance between the two classes of

employees is unnecessary and detrimental. Possible ways to narrow the gap between paraprofessionals and librarians include serving together on committees, working together in a team setting, and pairing at the reference desk.

Experiences

The librarian is often gone attending meetings, so there are many times when I am the senior staff person, or indeed the only staff person on hand to help patrons. Remote assistance is available from our main library, but I still have a lot of responsibility. If a person has driven 150 miles to use our collection, I can't say "I'm sorry, but the librarian is gone." I must try to help that person. My most memorable experiences in reference have taken place when I was alone and in charge of the library. An incident that stands out in memory occurred when I helped a retired librarian who had missed the computer revolution. She was taking a class at a community college in a nearby county and drove to our library for help on a paper about earthquakes and tsunamis. I showed her how to use the CD-ROM databases, and she enjoyed exploring our library's resources. When she left, she asked whether I could give her something with our library's name on it, and I offered her the librarian's card. I felt good about the transaction, because I thought I had been able to slow myself to her pace and that I had empathized with her and shared in her pleasure as she mastered the new technology. But I was astonished the next week when a fifty-dollar check for the friends of our library came in the mail from her.

The most common ready-reference questions in our library concern the tides and the weather. The most often asked reference questions are about whales and dolphins, but other creatures get their share of questions, too. One such question came from a business gearing up to manufacture miniature crabpots designed to be cast from fishing poles. The crabpots were made of


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molded plastic that could have colored dyes injected into it, and the manufacturer wanted to know whether one color was more appealing to crabs than another. A review of the literature revealed that while crabs do have sophisticated vision, and do seem to see in color, foraging behavior of crabs revealed that, "No, feeding crabs do not have favorite colors."

My favorite reference questions are those that involve identifying strange creatures that fishermen bring up in their nets. At these times, I am reminded of how strange and wonderful life is and of what a mysterious and beautiful world we live in. I have seen bizarre creatures from the ocean depths and stunning coral that wasn't supposed to live off the Oregon coast. And there are occasional benefits outside the library. I have stroked the back of an infant harbor porpoise separated from its mother shortly after birth, cast up on the beach, and brought to the center. As I touched him, he snorted and blew; I could feel the wildness of him, and I realized that it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a great gift. It has all been a great gift. 

Heart

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transferred to home life in unexpected ways. In my previous life, I "piled, not filed." Now, my grocery list gets written down in order of the aisles at my favorite store and the bookcases at home are organized by Dewey, sans the spine labels. Thanks to this organizational expertise, I've had a number of sublime moments when an event that I've coordinated goes off flawlessly.

All these qualities have been a great benefit to my life, but what I treasure most is the standing I've earned with the children of my community. Being loved by innumerable children is a benefit that I never envisioned

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when I began this work. Knowing that children and parents trust me implicitly fills me with pride as well as an awesome responsibility to merit that stature and the privilege. It reaffirms my underlying belief in being ever upright and true, for there are always little ones watching, and learning from me. Librarianship keeps me honest. 



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