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Revitalizing Reference

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Revitalizing Reference

I've been fielding reference questions since 1982 when I landed my first reference librarian position at BA Investment Management Corporation. One thing that has remained constant through the years is that users have questions and reference librarians know how to find answers. It is amazingly rewarding when you do it well. Not a day goes by that I don't learn something new and receive the gratitude of a patron who often goes away impressed by what librarians can do for them. That gratitude can't be put in the bank, but it is worth an awful lot to me.

When I think back to 1988, the year I arrived at Southern Oregon State College, as SOU was known then, it's hard not to think about how reference work has changed through the years. Back then we had one electronic database, ERIC on CD-ROM, and we were so excited about it we even had business students using it for their research. Dialog searches were commonly done using a dumb terminal with a phone receiver plugged into it. Boy, you wanted to be fast and prepared when you got online where every second cost you money! Gradually we added computers to the reference area and moved the microfilm and microfiche elsewhere. Each computer was designated to run a particular database on a CD-ROM. We eventually added CD towers and little by little, more and more print reference sources became a thing of the past. It was pretty traumatic when we cancelled *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* in print and went entirely with the electronic version. Those were the days when users had to physically come into the library to use databases. Gradually CDs became passé and databases became accessible through remote servers. Our card catalog also became a thing of the past and we auctioned off the catalog cases. Increasingly we used electronic resources to answer reference questions and then the most amazing tool of all came along ... the Internet. At first we had to be encouraged to use it to answer questions, but now it is often the first tool of choice. The ultimate, "Killer App" if you will. Our users no longer have to be in the library to access our resources. They can use the catalog and databases from home 24/7 and can also virtually chat with a reference librarian day or night. Our reference area has transformed into a Learning Commons. We've added a Writing Center and Math Lab to our services and our partners at the reference desk are undergraduate students who take care of all the technical questions.

In this issue of *OLA Quarterly* we'll hear from Heidi Senior about the experience of employing student reference assistants at the University of Portland. Cheryl Middleton from OSU leads us through the creation of their Learning Commons and how it has evolved through the years. Luke Kralick from Tillamook County discusses a unique partnership with their Educational Service District to provide teachers with a class on library databases that can be taken for continuing education credit. Paul Frantz and Brian Westra from the University of Oregon engage us in a lively discussion about chat reference widgets and the importance of location, location, location. Steve Silver and Scott Gallagher-Starr explain what happened at Northwest Christian University when the vendor for Oregon's Statewide Database Licensing Program switched from EBSCO to Gale. This change was particularly difficult for those of us in academic reference services. Lisa Tattersall describes how reference services have grown and changed at Corvallis-Benton County Library. Dale Vidmar describes a process of "Intentional Reference" and finally Anne Billeter gives us a both sides of the argument in her article, "Reference Hasn't Changed at All, *but* Reference Has Changed a Lot."

I offer sincere thanks to the contributors of this issue and particularly to Diane Sotak who held my hand through the editing process. The articles reflect the myriad issues faced by all types of libraries as we attempt to provide excellent service to our users in an environment of rapidly changing technology and diminishing resources. "Revitalizing Reference" has been an enjoyable theme to explore in this issue. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

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