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Intentional Reference:

A Mindful Approach to Fielding Questions Beyond the Desk

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At times, reference work is like playing centerfield—standing ready in position, pounding a fist into your mitt, and waiting for a question instead of a ball to be hit your way. But there is a difference between just standing out in centerfield waiting for something to happen and playing the position with the intention of making a play. Similarly, there is a difference between going out and sitting at the reference desk and going out prepared with the intention of providing assistance and improving your game. Playing centerfield and fielding the position professionally require forethought and mindfulness. Reference is much the same and requires a thoughtful, intentional approach to make good service better.

According to scholars such as Robert Slavin, a primary characteristic of an outstanding teacher is intentionality—having a purpose with which to cultivate informed reflection. If we consider reference work in the same way we consider teaching, then would it not make sense to approach what we do with the same kind of intentionality that a teacher does when entering a classroom? Being intentional is being purposeful, directed, mindful, present, and pointed towards a target or objective. More than anything, intentionality is a prime characteristic of being outstanding, not just good, at something. Why? Although we may learn by doing, we learn more by reflecting upon what we do (Farrell 7).

Donald Schön describes three different levels of consciousness or thinking within professional practice:

1. *Knowing in action* – thinking embedded in the act of doing. Knowing in action is the act of using what we have learned to navigate a present or future experience. It is at this level that we articulate intention, anticipating and visualizing what we want to occur. Intentionality is important in framing an approach to new situations based on past experiences and acquired knowledge.
2. *Reflection in action* – thinking informed by the interpretation of an immediate action or situation. Reflection in action is perhaps the most demanding type of reflection because it requires thinking about an experience as it occurs and creating a sense of order. As we reflect in action, we need to be present in the moment and use all our faculties to correctly interpret the situation.
3. *Reflection on action* – thinking about what happened and articulating thoughts afterwards. Reflection on action allows us time to think about what has occurred, then use past experiences to inform future decisions. As such, reflection on action will generally prepare us to better clarify real-time experiences based on what was done in the past. The reflective thoughts on our past experiences help to guide future intentions.

Most of what librarians do in reference work is reflection in action because we never know exactly what kind of question will be asked or who will ask the question. Even after an effective reference interview, when we begin to work with an individual, we are constantly trying to interpret what the individual needs and whether or not we are successfully moving toward that end. We make multiple decisions—some of which can be made based on a simple facial expression or verbal utterance. Reference requires the creativity and flexibility necessary to adapt and change our approach.



Brookfield called the adaptations or changes that we make during an activity or experience “critical incidents” (147–148). They are critical because we enter into an unplanned realm that is a mixture of informed trial and error. These moments can serve as our personal textbook if we reflect upon what we did, what worked, what did not work, and how the experience affected us. Yet, critical incidents can be unsettling for the best of us. Functioning in relative uncertainty is difficult at best especially in a situation in which librarian and the person seeking assistance are often striving to find something specific. Reference being an inexact science then evolves into “working with” an individual rather than answering a question. To go one step further, reference is about creating relationships rather than encounters when our approach is deliberate and intentional from the start and reflective afterwards.

Get Your Head in the Game

In any game, coaches will often remind the players to “get their head in the game.” They remind the players to be present and think about what they are doing and what they are trying to do. Players often try to visualize what will occur and how to best approach any particular situation. Good players want the ball to be hit their way. Similarly, good librarians want to encounter an individual with a question or an information need. They want to offer assistance and help individuals.

So how can we approach reference work in the same way as a professional player? Reference does not happen by accident. It does not happen when we go to the desk with an armload of work from our offices nor when we bury ourselves behind oversized computer monitors that can wall us off from individuals with information needs. Reference happens when we are active recipients and willing participants. Do we gather work to do before we go to reference, or do we gather ourselves for the work we will do at reference?

Imagine asking yourself the following questions prior to working at reference:

- What do you intend to do to make the session productive and meaningful?
- What skills will you focus on to improve the reference process?
- What will you do to engage and connect with individuals at reference?

Equally as important, do you ever take the time to reflect upon what happened during a reference session? If the objective is to become more purposeful in our approach to reference, then taking the time to reflect upon what occurs during reference work lets us think of our work as a transformative learning experience that helps us improve our craft.

The following questions are designed to help you focus on what you want to achieve during an upcoming reference session. You can use these questions to prompt yourself, or you can work with a colleague to answer these as a team. Working with a colleague can provide extra benefits as you share ideas and approaches together. Collegial teamwork can often produce much more than the sum of your individual ideas and work. More importantly, colleagues can complete both the questioning strategies prior to and those after in about ten or fifteen minutes, or you can take a few moments to answer the questions yourself. You could record your intentions and reflections on paper or on an audio file, so you can check back and reflect upon what you wanted to achieve.



Sample Questioning Strategies Prior to Reference Work

- As you think about your next reference shift, what do you intend to do to make the session productive and meaningful?
- What skills will you focus on to improve your personal reference practice?
- What will you do to maintain your focus on reference? How will you avoid distractions such as other work or conversations with colleagues?
- What will you do to engage and connect with the individuals in the reference area?
- How will you determine if an individual's research needs were satisfied or that you achieved the intended outcomes?
- What verbal and nonverbal cues will make your reference transactions more successful?

Sample Questioning Strategies After Reference Work

- How do you feel about your reference session?
- What happened during the session? How did you work on reference skills?
- Did you accomplish what you intended? How did what you planned to do compare with what actually happened? Were you able to avoid distractions?
- Did you have a reference transaction? How did the transaction occur? How was contact initiated?
- How did you interact with individuals in the reference area?
- What did you learn from this reference session and how will you use this experience to inform future reference sessions?

Further Activities to Promote Intentionality and Reflection

The following are additional activities that can help librarians become more intentional and reflective in their approach to reference work:

- Outline your personal reference philosophy:
 - o What do you value?
 - o What is important?
 - o How do you make yourself available and approachable?
 - o What do you want to achieve during your reference work?
- Write a journal containing intentions and reflections about your reference work.
- Use self-assessment inventories that can help you monitor what you value and how well you accomplish what you value.
- Record and observe reference activities.
- Assess reference interactions with a self-designed questionnaire that addresses what you value.
- Follow-up assessments with individuals that you have helped. Simple follow-up activities can not only help our practice, but they can demonstrate the value of our work to the individuals with whom we are interacting.

Reference work is an art that necessitates mindfulness and practice. The more we do will not necessarily make us better in and of itself. The more we think and reflect upon what we do is the key to perfecting our art. If we step behind the desk without our intentions and



experiences to guide us, then chances are we will not make the big play when opportunity arrives. We may have our head down, checking an e-mail or reading an article, or concentrating on our other work, when an individual decides to risk asking for a moment of our time, a moment of our day, and a moment of our career for assistance. That moment is our opportunity, but will we be ready ... pounding a fist into our mitt, poised, and available for what will come our way? 🍂

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