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Revelation at the Reference Desk:

Or, Why We All Need to Train Library Patrons

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In the Fall of 1999, I had the opportunity to cross one of the fences in the library business. I took a three-month leave of absence from my job at a public library so that I could fill in for a librarian on leave-of-absence from the University of Portland. It was a good experience; I worked in a different setting, met some good people, and got a chance to play with some new toys.

Working at an Academic Library's Reference Desk

Although the work was enjoyable, something bothered me at the job. I was dismayed by the attitude many of the students had about research and learning. The typical attitude was that knowledge is best found in tiny pieces, and that these pieces are best delivered over a computer. The resistance that students put up to using books could be maddening!

The ultimate example involved two first-year nursing students who needed my help for their course on the history of nursing. During the second week of school, the instructor had given them a simple assignment, designed to get them acquainted with the basic research tools of nursing literature. To prompt their thinking, she had given them some tidbits of nursing lore. One of these was that Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, two heroines of the Underground Railroad, had also been nurses in the Civil War. The students decided to go with that story, and started searching the electronic indexes. As I helped them, we found articles on Civil War nursing, but no mention of Truth or Tubman. Then, we found plenty on Tubman and Truth, but nothing on them as nurses. I suggested we check their biographies to which the students replied, "that would be too much trouble" even though they had already spent at least half an hour on the computer. I bet them a nickel I could find the books in a minute, and came back with three. A check in the indexes found no mention of Truth having been a nurse, and I suggested to the students that they select another topic. One looked me straight in the eye, and in a calm voice said, "That's the trouble with books, you can never find what you need in them." Then she turned back to the computer, confident that if she just phrased the search the right

way, the information would be found. They were still there a half-hour later. The next day I came across them in the student union, and asked if they had found anything. They said, "No, so we just made something up."

If that incident revealed students' attitudes toward books, a second incident showed me how students perceived librarians. A student came up to me at the Reference Desk and asked, "Can you help me with a knowledge question, or are you just here to help with the computers?" There it was in a nutshell; as far as she knew, my job consisted of clearing paper jams, resetting frozen machines, and occasionally instructing on database searches.

My first thought after these incidents was that academic libraries sure do a lousy job of bibliographic instruction, given all their talk. However, on second thought, I realized that most of these computer-dependent, book-avoiding, "librarians are there for technical support" students were freshmen. Indeed, they were freshmen in the first two months of their collegiate experience. These students had little, if any, exposure to the university's librarians and their bibliographic instruction program. Their behavior followed the patterns set by the other libraries they had visited in their lives. In other words, the school and public libraries had taught them these behaviors and attitudes! These students, representative of the mass of UP students, had been trained to avoid the two greatest resources in a library: its books and its librarians.

I realized that the "self-service, self-reliant" approach taken by most school and public libraries meant that patrons are not getting the information they need. Lancaster cites a study in which college faculty and Ph.D. students, the most experienced library users, only found one-third of all of the relevant items in the databases they searched. Now if these presumably adept library users could not find everything, what about the typical public library patron, with two years or less of college, who needs information on a health topic, or how to get a mortgage, or their child's problems in school? I shudder to think how many fumble at the catalog, or the Internet machines, and then walk away, thinking that the library has nothing for them.

The Responsibilities of the Public Libraries

So, what can we do in our public libraries to make those college freshmen appreciate books as much as the Internet

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and recognize that librarians can help? We have made strides toward accessibility by improving signage, and encouraging staff to have smiling faces. However, we need to go beyond that. We need to become "salesmen of information." Think of real estate agents. They put out flyers, call you up, pass out calendars, all sorts of things to say "come to me when you need a house." Once you call them, they talk to you and find out what kind of house you want, its ideal location, and a realistic price. They search the Multiple Listing Service database, and drive you to promising sites. Their goal is the same as yours: finding you a house you are happy with and can afford. They do not wait behind the desk and hope you come to them and say, "I want the blue house on Tillamook Avenue, let's go make an offer." If they did, we wouldn't see them as relevant, and the house hunt would, for most of us, be a longer and more stressful affair. It all begins by them reaching out to contact us.


So it is with public libraries. We must take advantage of all opportunities to get up from behind the desk and ask people in the library if they have found the information or the item that they need. In doing so, we will help those who need it, and show the client that when they need help, we are there to provide it. Best of all, we don't charge a commission! In addition, as we train patrons to use the catalogs and other databases, we need to quash the notion that competency on these machines means that the user then knows how to find everything in the library. The best library catalogs are mediocre guides to the collection, the Internet is a mess, and our subject databases can be tricky to use, if the patron is even aware of their existence. Until some magic age when a search engine *really* finds all there is to know on a subject, people need to remember that the best place to start is with a librarian.

Let's look at ourselves: How many times in the course of a day do we ask each other for help? And we are trained in library work, and spend 40 hours a week in the environment. What were we thinking when we started pushing the idea that our patrons could master most library skills unaided? Like good real estate agents, we need to seek out people who are looking for information, and provide it. We must get close to them so they are not afraid of reaching out and "disturbing" us. We must initiate simple conversations, asking them "Are you finding what you need?" We must let them know that we want them to ask us for help.

**Putting information in the hands
of the people who need it is our job**

If a patron leaves a library without the information he needs, and he never asked for or received help from a librarian, then we have not lived up to our responsibilities. Libraries and librarians are among the most underutilized information resources around. The existence of large non-fiction sections in bookstores proves that. We can feel proud of our circulation statistics, our crowded programs, and our busy public areas. We can favorably compare our patron statistics to other libraries, and think

we are doing a good job. But are we? The service population of my public library is almost 49,000. If the community had only one grocery, one hardware store, one paint store, how busy would they be with 49,000 people to serve? We have a lot of room for improvement.

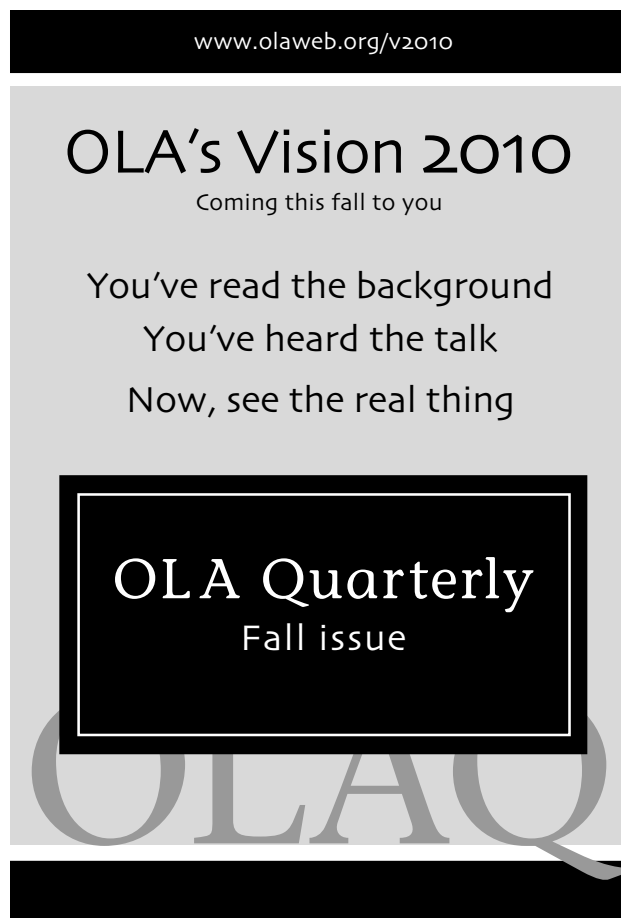
We can improve, and let people know by our actions that the library does have the information they need. When the people who use the library consistently get the help they need to find the information they want then they will come, and come again. We will know we have done our best. To do any less means accepting the role of computer technician as the epitome of the library profession. We can do better. It is our job, our joy, our responsibility. 

References

Lancaster F.W., 1999. Second Thoughts on a Paperless Society. *Library Journal* 124 (15): 48-50.

Note

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A poster with a black header containing the URL www.olaweb.org/v2010. The main body is light gray with the text "OLA's Vision 2010" in large black font, followed by "Coming this fall to you" in smaller black font. Below this, three lines of text are stacked: "You've read the background", "You've heard the talk", and "Now, see the real thing". At the bottom, a black box with a white border contains the text "OLA Quarterly" in large white font and "Fall issue" in smaller white font. A large, faint "OLAQ" watermark is visible in the background of the poster.