Types of Reference Services in a Public Library

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Abstract

This paper is an integrated report about several of my observations at a suburban public library. It focuses on the different types of reference services available in public libraries. There is a special concentration on three types of reference services: readers' advisory, ready reference, and literacy programs, given their frequent occurrence during my observation period. The readers' advisory section analyzes a few specific strategies used by the librarians and possible reasons for their use. The ready reference section explores the continued importance of reference services, how reference interviews are conducted by the observed librarians, and the types of materials use to answer patron questions. The literacy programs section emphasizes the importance of having international language materials and programs available in the library based on the community's needs. All in all, this paper showcases several of my observations and related thoughts, with the help of scholarly journal articles, about the various types of reference services I witnessed at this public library during my observation period.

Types of Reference Services in a Public Library

We have learned a lot about reference services: what they are, who they were made for, what tools are used to perform tasks, but none of that compares to experiencing reference services in real life. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to observe and interact with the librarians at the adult reference services desk at a suburban public library throughout February and March. The observation period included 2–3-hour visits on four different days over the course of three weeks to experience both busy days and slow days. The topic that stood out the most to me during my observation at this library was the variety of reference services that were provided by the librarians. Within this paper, I will express my observations and thoughts, along with the help of scholarly sources, about the various types of reference services that I observed were commonly used within a public library.

Types of Reference Services

In "Reference and Information Services: An Introduction," it explains several types of reference services, including "readers' advisory, ready reference, research consulting, subject specialists, bibliographic verification and citation, interlibrary loan and document delivery, instruction, literacy programs, and outreach and marketing" (Wong & Saunders, 2020, p.13). During my observation period, I was not able to experience all of these types of reference services. The three types of reference services I observed the most were readers' advisory, ready reference, and literacy programs.

Readers' Advisory

Readers' Advisory (RA) involves recommending books to library users for leisure reading (Wong & Saunders, 2020). Aside from the ready reference questions that were asked by patrons, RA questions were the second most frequent occurrence out of the types of reference

services that I observed. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people, of varying ages, that came up to the reference desk to ask for book recommendations. The main reason I was surprised is that many people today can simply look online using a variety of websites and applications, such as Goodreads or TikTok (the BookTok community), to receive and/or perform RA on their own (Naik, 2012). This phenomenon was further explored by Naik, specifically in relation to Goodreads. Naik (2012) discovered that readers leaving reviews and participating in discussions about books online would subconsciously use RA strategies that are typically used by librarians, like using appeal terms or suggesting books that have similar themes or subjects. These types of platforms provide a convenient and social way to receive RA, which can be quite appealing.

However, the fact that library users are still seeking out librarians for RA help is likely related to the same reasons people ask ready reference questions: they trust librarians to be a reliable source, they cannot or are uncomfortable using other means, and/or they simply enjoy the interaction with the librarian (Wong & Saunders, 2020). As Trott (2012) illustrates in his article exploring the integration of reference and RA services, reference and RA services have similarities, especially in the way the librarians interview the patrons in order to help them, and should be regarded as having equal importance in a library. Therefore, it makes sense to assume that people still seek out both services for similar reasons.

During the RA interactions with the patrons, I noticed a few strategies that the librarians used. Two strategies were using a professional tone and specific vocabulary when describing the books they were recommending. To me, it was like the librarian was trying to use certain words or subjects to trigger a reaction in the patron to get an idea of what to suggest, but they were also trying not to let their own opinions about those words or subjects show. The first reason for this

strategy that the librarian used is likely to prevent bias from playing a role in the RA interaction. This issue of bias in RA is not a new idea, as is explained by Tarulli (2018) in the article where she reminds library professionals to stay vigilant against bias in the field among the public's newfound interest and concern about biased information. In relation with my observation, an important point that Tarulli (2018) makes is readers can be influenced by the words used by a librarian, so it is crucial that librarians remain professional and ethical to prevent their suggestions from being colored by personal opinions or bias. The second reason for this strategy is certain terms can elicit appeal in a reader, which can help the librarian select the right books to suggest for the reader. This idea is explored further by Lawrence (2022) in their article about appeal and the aesthetic and nonaesthetic distinction in RA. This idea can essentially be summed up by explaining that appeal terms, best described as aesthetic terms, are a "specialized language" we use to "characterize our tastes and experiences" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 416), and we use them when recommending books to attempt to bring about past feelings and experiences surrounding the term that the reader found aesthetically pleasing and would want to experience again.

One more strategy that the librarian took advantage of was the library's displays. At the library I visited there were several displays set up for the patrons to browse. Some displays were updated but their theme never changed, such as the "HITS" display that contains popular new books. This library also had displays that changed monthly depending on the themes surrounding the month. For instance, in February, there was one display section dedicated to romance books because of Valentine's Day. During one RA interaction, the librarian suggested that the patron browse the display since it matched the subject that they were interested in, and to tell them if anything caught their eye. By introducing this library user to the display, it will also encourage

them to check out the displays in the future and participate in passive RA. The importance of "reader-useful displays" was highlighted by professionals in an article discussing RA services, education, challenges, and its importance in libraries; in fact, displays were referred to as RA's "magic bullet" and a great way to introduce readers to new genres and authors (Tarulli & Wyatt, 2019, p. 5).

After figuring out what type of book the reader was looking for, the librarian was able to suggest 3-4 books. The librarian was able to find the recommended books or at least put them on hold for the library user before sending them to the circulation desk to check out. The library users seemed to be satisfied with the suggestions after each interaction. While RA interactions occurred, ready reference questions were asked more frequently.

Ready Reference

In recent years, with the emergence of platforms like Google and Wikipedia, many have questioned if reference services are still necessary, as is explained by Buss (2016). Buss (2016) further discusses that reference transactions have been declining for the last three decades and how reference librarian positions are being renamed or transformed to better fit with the trends and user needs. Buss (2016) concludes that although the types of questions might change throughout the years, "[c]ertain questions require discretion, judgement, and advanced techniques, and that's where librarians come in" (p. 270), thus cementing the idea that reference services are still required today. This conclusion is backed up by the popularity of ready reference questions during my observation period. Patrons of all ages stopped by with questions. Examples of questions asked include:

- Can you give me a list of books about writing résumés?
- What is a ghost writer?

- What is the phone number to Restaurant Y?

The librarian performed a reference interview for each question, but it was not as formal as it is explained in the textbook; it felt more like a natural conversation between two people. After patrons approached the desk, most reference interviews began with phrases, like "What can I help you with?" Then the librarian would ask clarifying questions before looking for the answer.

The library I observed at no longer has print ready reference materials due to lack of use. As was expressed by Brooks, Boris, and Rutledge (2022) in an article assessing the usability and relevance of the ready reference section at their library, "the traditional role of quick reference has largely been replaced by online resources" (para. 15). This is similar to what I was told by the librarian when I was observing. Therefore, the librarian used online resources to find the answer. Resources used varied depending on the question. For instance, the librarian used Google to find a business's phone number, whereas they used a database to help a patron with their résumé questions.

After finding the answer for the patron, the librarian always asked: "Can I help you with anything else?" This was their way of checking if the patron was satisfied and ready to conclude the interview. Saunders and Ung (2016) point out in their article examining LIS students' attempts at reference interviews that if these types of closing questions are not asked, then there is a chance that the patron will leave dissatisfied because they do not feel comfortable asking for more information. It is also a good way to signal the end of a reference interview, which can be hard since librarians have to take cues from the patrons to determine if the interview is over or not (Saunders & Ung, 2016). The librarian always received confirmation that the patron was satisfied and ready to end the interview from what I observed.

Literacy Programs

During my observations, only two questions were asked related to this reference service. The first question was if any ESL programs were available. As expressed by Vårheim (2014) in their article about trust in the public library, libraries are seen as trustworthy by many people, especially immigrants, since they offer information services to everyone, treat all patrons equally, and provide a space available to everyone. Given this fact, it makes sense why people would seek information about learning a new language and other skills at the library that I observed. The area that this public library is located is home to a variety of languages and cultures. Thus, the library had plenty of resources available to offer this patron since it is a crucial need for the community. The librarian was able to connect the patron with digital resources, like Pronunciator, and suggest programs, like an English language conversation group.

The second question was if there were books available in other languages. Grossman et al. (2022) discovered in their article exploring how public libraries help immigrants adjust to life in their new country that checking library materials, like books, CDs, and DVDs in their heritage language, was the most common library use performed by immigrants. Like many public libraries, this library has a collection of international language books, magazines, and newspapers available. Therefore, the librarian was able to affirm their question and show them where the international language section was located. Having books available in a patron's language is important because it can help them feel comfortable and included and help with learning the new language (Grossman et al., 2022). Overall, I felt that this library and its librarians were prepared for these types of questions.

Conclusion

Throughout my observation period, I was able to see the different types of reference services available in public libraries. In this paper, I highlight my observations and thoughts

surrounding three specific services: readers' advisory, ready reference, and literacy programs. I discovered that it is important to remain professional, use appeal terms, and take advantage of available tools in RA interactions. I learned that ready reference services will always be necessary, and that it is essential to use closing statements to end an interview to make sure that the patron is satisfied. Lastly, I realized how crucial it is to have international language materials and programs, especially in areas with many different cultures. This observation assignment enabled me to learn more about reference services by seeing real-life examples of what I am learning.

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