Quantity is *Not* Necessarily Quality: A Challenge to Librarians To Develop Meaningful Standards of Performance for Library Reference Services

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The idea of performance standards presumes that there is a consensus in the library profession about what good performance is. However, the profession has been hesitant to evaluate reference service qualitatively. We are constantly evaluating reference service quantitatively, as if our reference statistics really mean something, while in just about any library you choose, the staff will freely admit that their reference statistics are inaccurate. And even if your library is one of those where staff really do keep track of every question they get, what does that mean?

Most administrators seem to adhere to the simplistic view that the more questions you answer, the better you're doing. This sort of reasoning is rampant in all areas of library administration. We cling to the belief that quality *is* quantity. This assumption certainly makes evaluation simple: as long as the numbers are increasing, the library must be doing a good job. This belief is based on another premise of library administration — that funders respond to simplistic notions (the bigger the numbers, the better the library's doing), and that it isn't worth the trouble to try to explain more complicated rationales to them. This is probably true, but it doesn't excuse library administrators for basing their internal decisions on such simplistic notions.

If a reference staff answers a large number of questions, that could mean simply that the library is so incomprehensibly organized that users cannot find anything on their own. If such a library is reorganized, the *number of reference questions answered could actually decrease*, while the users of the library receive better service, being able to find things more quickly for themselves.

Perhaps a less sophisticated group of users asks more questions in the library — perhaps they ask fewer, because they are intimidated. Perhaps the libraries that get the most questions also get the easiest ones. Fewer, more complicated questions can take more time than lots of easy questions. A staff can get a large number of questions and direct people to sources rather than helping them or teaching them through the process. Another staff can get the same number of questions but take the time to go the extra mile and really help the patron. And there's always the reference librarian who isn't going to take less than twenty minutes to answer any question, regardless of how simple, and regardless of how frustrated the patron and fellow staff (taking up the slack) get in the process.

Reference service is too complex and too important to be judged simply on the basis of how many reference questions any group of people answers. At some point, we have to deal with the quality of that service. If we don't know what quality we have, we have no way to determine if we're improving or getting worse, what kind of training for the reference desk works, and whether or not individual reference librarians are doing a good job.

The first attempt to confront the question of the accuracy of reference service in libraries was reported in 1969.[1] The researchers used "anonymous shoppers" to ask questions of reference librarians in public libraries, and the results were disappointing. The authors reported the following shortcomings: "minimal interest in exactly what inquirer is seeking, failure to recognize fairly well-known titles, undue dependence on somewhat outdated books rather than on current reports in answering requests for recent information, a concept of resources limited to the book or at most the book and the magazine rather than to the full range of communication media, and lack of initiative on the part of staff in seeking material

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from another source if the local library does not have it."[2]

Twenty years later, there is no indication that libraries are doing any better. In his 1984 article on reference evaluation, Alvin Schrader concluded that "unobtrusive procedures have not yet become a component of the standard methods for evaluating library and information service performance."[3] He continued, "The problem of the lack of commitment to reference service excellence will neither go away nor be resolved by the kind of passive approach which has so far characterized our efforts. Researchers, educators, and practitioners must, first and foremost, acknowledge the existence of problems with respect to reference service accuracy. This acknowledgment has not yet occurred on a wide scale. Until it does, until our community is prepared to take seriously the call for reference service accuracy, unobtrusive performance measurement will remain as the next frontier for library and information services. As of now, we are still in the age of misinformation."[4] The editors of the collection in which Schrader's article appears have an even more succinct analysis of our current situation, "It is suggested by the papers in this collection that one reason librarians suffer the ignominy of low salaries and even lower community respect is that they do so badly at their work."[5]

In 1985, Terence Crowley, the originator of "unobtrusive" questioning to determine reference accuracy, summarized the research in his article, "Half-Right Reference, Is it True?"[6] He concluded that although unobtrusive methodology had been accepted by researchers, it had not yet become a tool for evaluating reference service in the field, and he expressed concern: "Until librarians deal effectively as a profession with the many and seemingly endless sources of error in reference work, we will remain passive observers of popular culture. Some of us will provide timely, appropriate, and consistently accurate information, but the institution in which we work will not be fulfilling its potential role in the information age."[7]

Many reference administrators continue to object to the use of unobtrusive testing on ethical grounds. What I personally find unethical is advertising a service which is often of questionable quality. However, the library profession has had more than twenty years to adopt unobtrusive testing as a method of evaluating reference service and has not done so, and there is little likelihood that it will become an accepted method of library evaluation anytime soon. That is why I was so interested several years ago to read of the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Project being developed by Charles A. Bunge from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Marjorie E. Murfin from Ohio State University.[8]

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At that time, the program had been used in a number of academic libraries and was being tailored for public libraries. I was working at the Cumberland County Public Library & Information Center (CCPL&IC), and decided to contact Dr. Bunge to have CCPL&IC become part of his program. What we called the "Bunge forms" were used at CCPL&IC during 1988. The process is simple. The library receives a set of two-part forms, one part for the patron, a corresponding part for the librarian. When a patron asks a question, the librarian gives the patron one part of the form, and the librarian makes a quick note of the question on the second part of the form. After the transaction is completed, the librarian fills out the rest of the form, answering such questions as how busy the library was when the transaction occurred, how difficult the question was, how many sources were consulted, and whether the question was answered or not. The patron part of the form includes demographic information as well as questions about how busy the librarian seemed to be, how difficult the question was, and whether the patron's question was answered. When all the forms are completed, they are sent to Dr. Bunge and analyzed, and the library receives a lengthy report detailing the library's performance and comparing it to that of other participating libraries. As a person who had also been involved in unobtrusive testing of reference service at the same library, I found the Bunge-Murfin program to have many of the same benefits that unobtrusive testing has, without being nearly as time-consuming or potentially threatening to staff.

I did work the reference desk during some of the time that the forms were being used in Cumberland, and I would like to share one experience that illuminated for me how we often cannot trust our own perceptions of whether or not we are doing a good job at the reference desk. A patron asked me a question about government grants. I asked some follow-up questions and decided that the reason that I could not get a clear picture of what the patron wanted was because the patron herself was not certain. I did what I usually do in those situations: I gave her a reference book to start with and asked her to return for further help if she needed it. She did not return for further help, but did return the book, and at the time gave me her part of the form. I asked her if she had found what she needed and she said yes. After she left, I looked at the form.In the part where she was to indicate if her question had been answered, she had responded no. Some of us have long suspected that the many positive evaluations that libraries receive from patrons are not entirely related to reality. In this case, a patron was willing to be honest on a form, even one that she was handing directly to the person who had failed to help her, at the same time that she was not willing to be honest with that person face-to-face. That one interaction was enough to convince me that using the Bunge forms would give us information that we were not getting with our self-evaluation methods, such as the number of reference queries answered within twenty-four hours.

A frequent challenge to tests of reference accuracy is that they employ factual questions that are not typical of those asked in libraries, that the majority of questions asked in libraries are more complicated, and that librarians do very well in answering them. In the libraries that have participated in the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program, eighty-five percent of the questions asked were not strictly factual, and librarians were "less adept" at answering these. In Bunge's view, "that's to be expected, because the 'non-factual' questions are less definite, and the opportunities for patron dissatisfaction are greater."[9]

The other most exciting work being done in the area of reference evaluation is that developed by Ralph Gers and Lillie Seward when both were at the Maryland State Library.[10] The Maryland program involved unobtrusive evaluation in public libraries throughout the state to determine the rate of reference accuracy. As part of the survey, the researchers observed the behaviors that librarians used during reference transactions, and then determined the behaviors that were associated with success in answering the questions.[11] Next they developed training sessions for reference librarians (administrators came, too) based on what they deemed to be the most effective behaviors that they saw used during the unobtrusive survey. Those who participated in the workshops were encouraged to return to their libraries and train others. Following the workshops, the libraries were unobtrusively surveyed again. The results: libraries that had participated in the training had better success rates than those that had not.

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Ralph Gers is now working independently, and for a fee, any library or group of libraries can contract with him for the workshops, the unobtrusive testing, or both. Although the cost for the package is high by library standards, the training is intensive and often very productive. Gers reports that he has just had his first one hundred percent library — after the training, this library answered every question correctly in the follow-up unobtrusive survey.[12]

While we can use the two methods mentioned above to evaluate reference service in our libraries and develop training to improve that service, the performance standards that we develop must also consider the environment in which reference service occurs. Library administrators must admit that their reference staffs are frequently asked to be far more than reference librarians. Perhaps the most difficult situations arise in those libraries where there is no separate security staff, so that a reference librarian is required one moment to be courteous and helpful with a reference patron, and the next moment must become The Enforcer, instructing a disruptive patron about the consequences of continued unacceptable behavior in the library. Add that to the fact that administrators frequently ask their staffs to do too much, to work too many hours at a public service point, and we may have a formula for failure.

A recent article in *RQ* refers to the extremely low morale that has been observed in many library reference departments.[13] The article begins with a summary of the research that has shown a correlation between the morale of workers in various jobs and their performance. The article then details a study by Ralph Lowenthal using various instruments to survey four public library reference staffs to determine the level of their job satisfaction. Following that survey, he used the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program to determine the rates of reference success in those libraries. Not surprisingly, measures of job satisfaction such as perceived tension, stress and strain, emotional exhaustion, and disaffection from patrons were correlated with lower levels of reference performers. Conclusion: if a reference librarian is unpleasant for other staff to be around, that person probably isn't giving very good reference service, either. If an entire department is suffering from stress and strain, reference service in that library is probably suffering. Our performance standards must address the question of what volume of work a reference librarian can reasonably be expected to perform, both on a public service desk and off.

As a profession, we should no longer be content to assume that our libraries are giving good service.

Conclusion

Libraries have been reluctant to evaluate reference services qualitatively. Perhaps this is partially because such evaluation is difficult. Numbers, although they may be suspect when we examine them closely, are usually fairly easy to acquire. Perhaps it is also because by evaluating a service as "professional" as reference service, we are risking the discovery that our service, and therefore our profession, isn't always everything we'd like to think that it is.

Until we are willing to evaluate reference service in our libraries, we can have no empirical basis for determining what level of reference service we are giving. We will continue to have only our mushy assumptions as a profession about what standards of performance we should expect from our staffs and from our libraries.

As a profession, we should no longer be content to assume that our libraries are giving good service. We must take the responsibility for giving the good service that we persist in telling the public that we are offering. To do that, we must first determine what level of service they are receiving. Then we must do all that we can to maintain excellence when we have it, and to work toward better service when we find that service lacking.

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4. *Ibid.*, 210.

5. Katz and Fraley, 4.

6. Terence Crowley, "Half-Right Reference: Is it True?" *RQ* (Fall 1985): 59-68.

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8. Charles A. Bunge and Marjorie E. Murfin, "Reference Questions — Data from the Field," *RQ* (Fall 1987): 15-18.

9. Charles A. Bunge, letter to the author dated May 4, 1990.

10. Ralph Gers and Lillie Seward, "Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study," *Library Journal* (November 1, 1985): 31-35.

11. For one professor's objection to the Maryland methodology, see "Data abuse in reference report," letter to the editor from Thomas Childers, *LJ* (April 15, 1986): 10.

12. Ralph A. Lowenthal, "Preliminary Indications of the Relationship between Reference Morale and Performance," *RQ* (Spring 1990): 380-393.

13. Telephone conversation between the author and Ralph Gers, May 10, 1990.

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