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Self-Creation and Communal-Creation:  
A Philosophy of Reference Service

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## **Self-Creation and Communal-Creation: A Philosophy of Reference Service**

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Academic library reference service is vital to students. The interaction of reference librarians with students is very important; therefore, it is also important to examine the philosophy of reference service. Reference services are a basic element in our understanding of the concepts of individualization, in which individuals realize their particular and unique values and goals, and socialization, in which individuals absorb the values and goals of their culture or society, in academia. The academic library moves forward not through strict socialization, but through relationships that create meaning through both self-creation and communal-creation. Reference service should support both self-creation and communal-creation. "Self-creation" refers to the open-ended semiosis (the creation of meaning) for individuals, and "communal-creation" to open-ended semiosis for communities. Both are rooted in and fostered through narratives, which are the stories that we create, tell, and listen to, and which help us make sense of our experience and create a context for them.

The academic library is a key component in continuing education. The university is a vital institution, and the academic library is a part of the university's lifeblood. By the year 2000, "87 percent of Americans were saying a college education is as important as a high school diploma used to be" (Katz, 2002, 8). The library provides information to students and faculty. It is the primary source of tools for information and research. Reference services are the avenue that leads to information, quality research, and ideas. Katz (2002) lists three important qualities of reference service: a "superior reference collection," a "superior reference librarian," and "[t]ime" (183). The first and second qualities help the information-seeking and research process. The third provides the moments that turn mere information into research and ideas. In the academic setting, reference service is closely tied to library instruction. Library instruction provides learning tools for the search for information. Reichel (1984) believes that reference service and library instruction help researchers to "understand the process of literature searching and to execute a literature search successfully" (191). The academic library reinforces this idea by providing different channels for reference service, including the collection, the librarian, and instruction. Reference service can also be a part of open-ended semiosis for both the individual and the community.

Through reference and instruction, the library becomes the meeting ground for thinking and praxis (the translation of theoretical knowledge into practice), because information is directive, i.e., it guides or directs praxis. The self and the community rely on one another and influence each other. This intertwined relationship becomes the narrative in which information is enveloped and developed in history, philosophy, literature, and science, and which addresses the self and the community at both the local and the global level. Reference services provide educational direction for many different disciplines that leads toward praxis. Oboler (1977, 39) observes that, "[r]eference work, after all, still involves reason and judgment." If universities help students see that the local/national and global/international narrative of socialization is open-ended, then academic libraries can provide stimulus for such thought. Academic libraries, as a hub of intellectual activity, point toward both the need for socialization as well as the need to remove the barriers that socialization inevitably imposes. The task of the reference librarian is not to ask, "What should students learn in college?" or, "What job will this course of study lead to?" Questions

such as this suggest that college faculties are instrumentalities that can be ordered to a purpose. Instead, the task of the library, in general, and the reference librarian, in particular, is to enact freedom before the very eyes of students.

What values will the academic library inculcate? What should the agenda of the academic library be? Cain (2003) describes academic libraries as “slipping sanctuaries.” She writes at length:

In its history, the university—with its classical, monastic, or natured settings—has always served as a quintessential space for thought. Expressly, it has been an ivory tower where a student might look up and look down, alone, and take his or her bearing on the universe. But this function is slighted more and more in an age that demands material results: the utilitarian, the legislated, the countable, the visible, the noisiest in the bustle and stir... Mankind's future does not beg for hasty and showy improvements, however. If new generations are to arrive at new perspectives and realize better realities, they must face the future with the ability to cultivate long-standing love and deep-rooted wisdom. Developing abilities for untrammelled and full-capacity thinking and imagining is the primary duty of a university; all other university activities should grow out of this enterprise. (11)

Cain asserts that libraries should be a space that fosters thinking and imagining. The academic library must foster both thinking and praxis. Thinking and praxis lead to creation at both the level of the self and the level of the community, and the lines between self and community become blurred. Libraries are full of books, and books are read in order to enlarge the sense of what is important and possible for individuals and for society. The library's social function is not necessarily teaching or research; it is not necessarily the communication of knowledge. Its role takes shape in stirring things up. The role of the reference librarian is not to direct students into a frame of thought. The role of the reference librarian is to instill doubts into students' own self-images and the society to which they belong.

A tension remains between public rhetoric and a private sense of mission. Gaps remain between strict socialization and self- or communal-creation. In a liberal society, how does an academic reference librarian address information needs? Reference services, including the reference interview and library instruction, should address two universal needs. First, academic librarians should talk about the books and resources that have shaped and inspired them. Second, students should have access to information about people and thinking from previous generations, in other social classes, and in other parts of the world. The first need addresses individuals and communities at a relational level that extends into the realm of intellectual imagination and curiosity. The second need brings together individuals across generations and geographical boundaries by sharing historical accounts and narratives. Hence, reference services offer the institution information and stories that foster praxis among individuals and communities.

Academic reference services must address historical and relational needs, both of which have narratives. The philosophy of reference is rooted in an intellectual freedom that ultimately fosters self-creation and communal-creation. The academic library must provide a refuge where users can seek information, reflect, and critique. The academic library must allow for critical self-reflection and for critical communal-reflection. The academic library must sustain, through the use of reference services, a meeting place for theory and praxis. Reference services do not just offer information about “What?” and “Why?” but also about “How?” Thinking leads to possibility. We ought not forget Michael Moore's confession, “I really didn't realize the librarians were, you know, such a dangerous group...They are subversive. You think they're just sitting at the desk, all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them” (Raish, 2003, 124).

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