

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)

E-JASL: The Electronic Journal of Academic
and Special Librarianship

Winter 2006

Tiered Reference: The New Landscape of the Frontlines

Susan Gardner

University of Southern California

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ejasljournal>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

Gardner, Susan, "Tiered Reference: The New Landscape of the Frontlines" (2006). *E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)*. 70.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ejasljournal/70>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the E-JASL: The Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship



v. 7 no. 3 (Winter 2006)

Tiered Reference: The New Landscape of the Frontlines

Susan Gardner, Assistant Reference Coordinator

Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California, USA

susangar@usc.edu

Introduction

When one walks into a typical academic library today, he or she is hard-pressed to see a reference librarian in plain view working at a public services desk. The well marked “reference desk” of yore, staffed by a smiling librarian and once a staple of every traditional academic library, has evolved into a less visible, more amorphous facility. Most libraries now use a new service strategy called “tiered reference,” whereby the initial reference contact point is with trained students or paraprofessionals at a general service desk. These non-librarians field all manner of questions, including directional, computing, and occasionally reference. They answer any “basic” reference questions they can, and refer advanced questions to an actual librarian. What happened to the reference librarian and her service domain? Can we trust students to be the main gatekeepers? Even the best student worker has occasional lapses where his or her eyes are laden from a 2am outing, and they proceed to give a less than informed answer to a faculty member without bothering to make a referral. Do we really want our public image to be imprinted in the minds of faculty coming to the library as such? Are we selling out by valuing our expertise so little to think that students can effectively fill our shoes?

Evolution of Tiered Reference

Tiered reference evolved as people asked fewer reference questions at the reference desk. Virginia Massey-Burzio of Brandeis University first proposed the tiered model in 1992; the model featured a service desk staffed with graduate students who referred complex reference questions to a librarian available in a consultation office (Huling 871). Reference activities at Association of Research Library member reference desks have steadily declined since 1991: transactions between 1991 and 2004 went down 34% (“Service Trends”). As a result, many libraries now use some sort of tiered system like the one Massey-Burzio developed. The decline in questions is a result of

the ubiquity of the Internet and search engines like Google. Thanks to the Internet, librarians do not need to answer many traditional ready reference, or “factual,” questions since patrons find the answers online. The Internet is the new ready reference “authority figure,” or quick fix for the casual information seeking dabbler. Now, most of the questions asked in academic libraries are specific to the library as place, which staff and students can answer very well. There is no need for librarians to sit at communal desks twiddling their thumbs all day, as long as they are readily available should a serious reference question beyond the purview of Google arise. Tiered reference allows for this. At the University of Southern California (USC), where I currently work, Doheny Memorial Library (the flagship library) has tiered reference. Students and paraprofessionals field all questions at the Circulation desk, and then refer the advanced reference questions to librarians in a research consultation room. This works well because if it is not busy, librarians work on other things in seclusion. Also, because it is often not busy, the savvy librarian promotes their time in the room as “office hours” to patrons who contact them via other means.

Unmediated Chaos?

Google is the new Jeeves of choice, especially in academic libraries. Even I, a librarian with the utmost respect for the print reference monograph, now use Google for quick reference whenever possible. It is infinitely easier to type in a natural language prompt in Google and get quick results rather than walk to the reference stacks to look something up. Most of the time, Google is sufficient. One must still understand how to evaluate the results, of course, and pick out the sources that are reliable. This seems to be the hitch for students, and the area left for reference librarians to insert themselves.

The other day, I helped a student find statistics on suicide rates in the United States. When I went to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) web site, the student looked at the stats on the site and said impatiently that they already had those from Google, did I have any other ideas? This is a common refrain these days. Upon further probing, though, it turned out that although the student got these same NIMH statistics from a Google search, they pulled them from someone’s personal web page in which there was no attribution to the NIMH. The student had no concept of the original source coming from the US government. The Internet is notorious for this kind of mass customization, to the extent that either the original source goes unacknowledged or the original framework the piece of data extends from is downright impossible to trace. We see a related chaos from unchecked freedom on the Internet reflected in Google Scholar, which has competing variations on the same citation. Many people cite from an erroneous citation without checking on it, which perpetuates its popularity and ultimately its validity. And Wikipedia, the ultimate example of the reversible historical record, tends to come to the top of the results in a typical Google

search. This bodes for a future in which no scholarly work or historical event is indelible, but always runs the risk of reconstruction gone amuck to the point of a metamorphosis.

Information Commons: A Better Reference Desk?

Let's be honest: the library as place is becoming a thing of the past. Since the Internet can answer most ready reference questions and a good deal of the library's resources are accessible remotely, why should the user come to the library? If they do come to the library, it is usually not to do research. Even attempts at resurrecting the "library as place" in academia by building Generation Y- friendly "information commons," or computer labs with integrated technical and reference service points, cannot make students do research in the library or use library resources. At the University of Southern California (USC), we have a 12-year-old information commons in our undergraduate library. Does it bring more students into the library? Yes, but that is partly because it is open 24-7 and students need somewhere to go late at night. Does our combined reference and technical support help desk draw a higher number of serious reference questions than a traditional desk? Not that I can tell. In my four years there doing shifts alongside the student assistants, I only rarely get a real reference question. I mostly answer technical questions about the computers, which frankly the students can do much better than myself. We train our student workers in the Commons on all-purpose article indexes like Proquest, which answer a good deal of the basic reference questions. Students tend to approach fellow student workers first if they have a choice since they trust their peers.

I think that rather than being at the physical desk, I could be on call nearby and paged on those rare occasions when a reference question beyond the scope of the student arises. Most students in our information commons are not at the library to do research; this was confirmed in a 2003 survey we did of our undergraduate library users, in which only 12% came to do research while most came to study and use the computers (Gardner and Eng). Students often think they can meet all their research needs by using the Internet. Perhaps, since students in the information commons use the computers to get to the Web, we should install a link to page someone for help as needed on each computer. A student worker could answer the call and, in the rare occasion the question wasn't technical, page a reference librarian.

Virtual Tiering

In the past two months at USC, virtual reference was more active than ever before. We are participants in a 24-7 collaborative chat service and only do a few hours per week ourselves, relying heavily on our partners to answer our questions. This means the partners refer many questions back to us to answer in an email follow up, turning

chat into basically a virtual tiering system. I often think to myself as I follow up on a question the next day, if only I were online yesterday to help this chat patron in real time! I think in the future we need to increase the hours we cover in the chat collaborative, since the whole point of chat is to be there at the right moment for our patrons. Why outsource this so much if patrons now come online for help during regular working hours?

Point of Need Reference

I believe I successfully conveyed my sentiment that the traditional physical reference desk service point is in its twilight. I believe users still want the human element that has been the touchstone of the reference librarian's philosophy of service- I just think we need to rethink how we deliver it to them. Since patrons go to the library less frequently than ever for research, subject based instruction in the use of library resources at the point of need for a specific class assignment is crucial. We cannot rely on people being at the library when they research and serendipitously finding a reference librarian. Most faculty are scholars, and therefore actively engaged in their field as researchers already. They know the sources, and they want to research on their own from their office. Aside from answering questions for faculty and informing them of any changes in library resources affecting their disciplines, we mostly approach faculty for the sake of their students. Outreach to various departments to ensure librarian consultation occurs at that point in a class when there is a research component is a necessity. This is the best possible context for students to learn subject specific library resources, and the successful librarian makes certain students receive this guidance.

Librarians must also offer introductory sessions for lower level classes on the library basics (such as the catalog and Proquest), but even these need to be coordinated with an actual research assignment. Most schools have a core curriculum writing program or composition component which lends itself to partnership. Librarians need to insinuate themselves into departmental courses by doing class instruction, having a presence in course management software or class web pages, and getting reinforcement from the teaching faculty that librarians are indeed the expert when it comes to research. Rather than waiting for people to come to the reference desk, we need to go where the users are. "Roving reference" is another outreach possibility. Potential locations include the dorms, the University Writing Center, or a professor's office hours during the week before a term paper deadline. Once student contact is made, reference appointments can be set up for more in-depth consultations. The point is that we must forge our own consultation opportunities- we cannot expect them to come to us at the reference desk anymore.

Future of Reference Services

What does reference in the future look like? Google continues meeting most ready reference needs. Patrons come to the library to check out books and use the facilities, not to do research. Tiered reference staff use a paging mechanism to refer the occasional drop-in reference question to a librarian. A prominent button to page help is at every computer workstation in the library. Mostly, librarians do outreach, teach subject specific instruction for classes, and set up individual reference appointments from these contacts. Librarians answer many virtual reference queries via email and chat. Designated self-serve “research stations” are in the library for when a librarian is not available and each has a link to get virtual reference help, and a button to schedule an in-person appointment with a librarian. Self-directed learning is available in the form of tutorials at these stations. Well-trained front line students and paraprofessionals are committed to maintaining a strong service ethic and offering core service assistance while librarians busily meet users in their natural habitats: online and in the classroom.

Works Cited

Gardner, Susan, and Susanna Eng. “What Students Want: Generation Y and the Changing Function of the Academic Library.” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5.3 (2005): 405-420.

Huling, Nancy. “Reference Services and Information Access.” *Encyclopedia of Communication and Information*. 2002 edition.

“Service Trends in ARL Libraries, 1991-2004.” ARL.org. 2004. Association of Research Libraries. 21 October 2006. <http://www.arl.org/stats/arlstat/graphs/2004/pubser04.pdf>.

http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v07n03/gardner_s01.htm.