

Digital Reference Assignment

First of all, I really enjoyed this assignment, because it gave me a chance to interact with the information-seeking public without putting me under a great deal of pressure. As I have never done “real” reference, I appreciated the fact that I could take the time to research a question and compose a reply without feeling that the patron was waiting on me. Of course the patron is always waiting for an answer, but at least he’s not there staring me in the face, racing to his next appointment. Also, I could imagine the patron in my head as someone I would be comfortable with in person, which is not a luxury that one has in face-to-face interaction.

I have found that the experience I gained through answering IPL questions has translated fairly directly into my current job/internship at KCLS. I have recently started answering emails that come in from a feedback form on the website, and I find myself adopting the same patterns in those emails as in IPL answers (which is a pattern I originally copied from the example Lorri handed out to us early in the semester): “Greetings from the IPL! Thank you for your question... Thank you again for asking the IPL. I hope my answer has been helpful to you!” At first I resisted adopting exactly the same pattern, but then I decided that even though the KCLS patrons were usually asking for tech support rather than reference advice, it was still a customer service interaction, and the sorts of formalities embedded in that pattern would help patrons in both situations to feel at ease in the email interaction. Hearing Adam Hall speak really solidified these concepts in my mind; it’s all about helping the patron to feel positive about what has been accomplished by this interaction.

The other skill I learned was how to figure out what the patron is actually asking. Of course I have no way of knowing, most of the time, whether I actually got it right, but I made a point of rereading the entire question multiple times, while I was searching and composing my answer, in order to double-check that the question I was answering was the same as the one being asked. This problem is best demonstrated by my second IPL question, about finding dramatic monologues. I started going off on a total tangent and giving URLs to Project Gutenberg pages where the patron could find all these different plays, and then I got a reality check and told myself, “No, that’s not what she’s asking, so

don't go overboard." I just pointed her to a couple of websites with monologue suggestions, but she emailed back to say that she needed full-text after all! It turns out that my first instinct was right, but I am still grateful for the ability to revise my responses.

I think that the IPL serves a need of the Internet community; like any information organization, the Internet needs people, librarians, who know how to find what there is to be found. We are not Google, but we use Google. We synthesize and evaluate information. We teach. There are a lot of people trying to civilize the Internet, but it doesn't take organization very graciously. We're doing our best to tame its madness. When people can't find it on their own, they come to us, the reference librarians of the 21st century.

Speaking of Google, I can't help but compare the IPL to Google Answers, and although I've never been a Google Researcher, I can't help but feel that I'm getting paid better with the IPL. As Jessamyn West pointed out in her articles about Google Answers, the practice of putting a price of a few dollars on the answer to a question trivializes Researchers' skills. It places the emphasis on the answer rather than the process. To cross classes (I'm taking 550 this quarter as well!), it transforms a librarian-type person from an information *professional* to a minimum-wage information clerk for whom "the customer is always right." The ability of the knowledgeable professional to prescribe information solutions goes down the drain. Without following that train of thought too far off-track, this disturbing development is why I hope that the IPL and services like it prosper more than Google Answers. I would rather have a patron's genuine thanks than a few lousy dollars.

And speaking of teaching, this is a subject that we've touched on several times in class. It has not been too much of an issue for me most of the time, since I have no problem regurgitating search strategies. (I was particularly proud of the "site:.mk" Google search.) I did not even consider it a problem when kids asked for homework help, as long as it was a fairly direct question. I saw (and did not answer) at least one question where a grade-school kid had just regurgitated an assignment as a question to the IPL, as if s/he were commanding us to do it for her. This is the situation where I feel most keenly the difference between correspondence and face-to-face reference. If this kid had walked up to a reference desk and handed me the assignment, I would have engaged her

in the search process, and if I were good enough, she would have done most of the work without even realizing it. With correspondence reference there's no volley, only a serve, and I only get one chance to hit that perfect shot back to her. When I really want to say "Do your own homework," it's hard to know how much a patron can or will figure out on his own.

For me it's hard to figure out how much I think "overall reference practice" will change as a result of the growth of digital reference, because I'm only now getting into the reference arena. (I confess: I used to avoid reference librarians like the plague. They might talk to me!) I have heard it postulated that the questions that reference librarians get will become or are already becoming more difficult, since the easy questions can be answered with automated tools. I think that's a credible hypothesis. I also think that librarians may become even more important as the guardians of authority. In an age where any dog can create a website, selection (both inclusion and exclusion) is one of the most important methods of providing access to "good" information. If I find a site linked from a library website or the IPL, I can be sure that it's legit (more sure than if it's hosted on Geocities, anyway).

I certainly don't think that librarianship is fading away as a result of digital growth. Librarianship is changing, certainly, but it's not going anywhere. When I told people last year that I was going to be a librarian, every single person said "Wow, how exciting!" Maybe digital librarianship will be a happening thing, the career-fashion trend of the new millennium.