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LS 507  
Acclimation Exercise

## **Reference Sources and Service: A Personal Introduction in Two Parts**

### Part 1: Reference Sources

In order to ensure that I have access to a suitable reference collection or collections for my coursework, I was assigned the task of analyzing the collections of my local libraries. I used lists of highly recommended sources in Cassell and Hiremath's *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century* (2006) as a starting point. I searched the local library catalog to determine whether the best sources were held locally. I also perused the various sections of the reference collection to see if other similar items were present when exact titles could not be found.

The best reference collection in my area for the purposes on Dr. Rachel Fleming-May's Information Sources and Services course is housed at the Consortium Library on the University of Alaska, Anchorage (UAA) campus. The Consortium Library is the second largest academic library in the state and by far the largest within several hundred miles of Anchorage. The University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF) library, located 360 miles north of Anchorage, is larger in terms of number of volumes despite the fact that UAF has far fewer students than UAA -- 9,687 versus 19,674 students (Roberts, 2009; McDermott, 2008). This is largely because UAF conducts more research than UAA and focuses more on graduate and post-graduate studies. However, even if the UAF library were within reasonable traveling distance, it would be unnecessary to make the trip since spot checks in the UAF catalog show that both universities have a comparable selection of quality reference materials.

According to the *American Library Directory* (2008-2009), in the 2006 fiscal year, the Consortium Library held 499,697 unique titles; 729,648 volumes; 4,627 ebooks; and 3,700 print periodical subscriptions (p. 43). A 2008 job posting for the Consortium Library put that year's statistics at 820,450 volumes and 4,880 print periodical subscriptions (*Instruction and Reference Librarian*, 2008). Mike Robinson, Head of Library Systems at the Consortium Library, recently stated that the library provides access to more than 190 licensed databases and over 20,000 electronic journals and books (personal communication, February 3, 2009). The Consortium Library also houses the state's largest medical library, one of the state's largest federal document depositories, and the Alaska Resources Library (ARLIS) which contains a wealth of information on Alaska and the North. The statistics web page on the library site states that the 205,000 square foot library receives 11,000 visits per week (Chan, 2008).

In addition to serving the UAA community, the Consortium Library also serves a neighboring private institution, Alaska Pacific University (APU), as well as the general public thanks to a cooperative agreement with the Anchorage Public Library. Anyone with a card from the public library may check materials out from the Consortium Library, though off-site access to library databases is restricted to those affiliated with UAA or APU. The libraries also share a common catalog allowing users to search the holdings of the public library and its five branches, Consortium Library and other UAA extended campus libraries, ARLIS, and the Anchorage Museum Library all in one search (Consortium Library, 2009). As an employee at the Consortium Library, I have easy and complete access to all of the library's collections and resources, both online and off.

Extensive searching revealed that of the top ninety reference works identified by Cassell and Hiremath (2006, pp. 65-66, 88-89, 106-107, 128-129, 150-151, 177, 195, 208-209, 226), about 93% are available to me locally (either the same or newer edition). Half of the recommended titles are available in hard copy within the Consortium Library, while nearly one third of the items are available to me only in an online format. The remaining available items are found at the main branch of the Anchorage Public Library. The following chart details the number of items available to me locally or online.

<b>Available Resource Location</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
UAA Consortium Library	45	50
Anchorage Public Library (Main Branch)	11	12.2
Online Only*	28	31.1
Not Available Locally	6	6.7

\*Note that some of these are only offered in an online format, such as WorldCat, ProQuest and LexisNexis, while others are published in a print format as well. In the latter cases, the print versions are not available locally but I do have access to the online version through the open web, through the Consortium Library, or through the University of Alabama.

In most cases where a specific title is not available locally, several comparable works are. For example, the Consortium Library and Anchorage Public Library each own numerous atlases of the world, including recently published editions in various styles, but neither has the *New International World Atlas* (1999), which is highly recommended by Cassell and Hiremath (2006, p. 195). However, a search on WorldCat shows that this particular title is not as popular as the authors suggest as only two worldwide libraries own it.

The Consortium Library collection is inferior to that of the Public Library in some respects. Most notably, the university library is weak in materials intended for youth audiences. For example, the *Compton's by Britannica* (2007) encyclopedia for middle and high school aged youth is available at the Anchorage Public Library but not at UAA. Similarly, I would need to visit the Anchorage Public Library to

peruse the *MacMillan Dictionary for Children* (2001). Furthermore, the public library is superior to the academic library in some areas of general or popular knowledge. Titles such as the *Biography and Genealogy Master Index* (1980-2009), the *Hammond World Atlas* (2003), and *Chase's Calendar of Events* (1975-2009) are available exclusively at the public library. However, since my professional focus is on the academic library, the Consortium Library will remain my first and best choice with the Public Library supplementing the former whenever needed.

## Part 2: Reference Service

### **A Reference Experience**

In order to experience reference services from the user perspective, as well as to analyze the reference interview, I was tasked with asking a question at a reference desk in a local library. I sought out a library where I would be least likely to be recognized and one whose layout I was unfamiliar with. I selected a sizable public library serving a population of nearly 300,000 residents. I selected a question that I genuinely needed an answer to: How can I successfully grow sweet bell peppers in patio pots in the unique Alaskan climate? However, I phrased my question the way information seekers often do. Since the initial question is intended mostly as a way to break the ice and ensure one is asking at the right place, users will often ask short, vague questions when they approach the reference desk even though their actual information need is much more precise (Dewdney & Michell, 1996, p. 1; Cassell & Hiremath, 2006, pp. 15-16). With this in mind, I decided to ask simply for information about gardening. Armed with my question, I visited the library on the evening of February 2, 2009.

Upon entering the library, I began looking for a reference desk. As soon as I passed the circulation desk, I saw a large sign hanging from the ceiling. The sign was a cube, communicating information toward all directions. The side facing me read, "Ask Here" in very large lettering. The side to the right listed what I presumed to be appropriate materials to ask about at that particular desk, all types of fiction materials. However, since I did not see any other reference desk and I was playing the role of the novice user, I approached the desk despite its claimed focus. At first I thought the desk might not be staffed, but as I approached the chest high counter I found a small woman inadvertently hiding behind her computer monitor. She looked up as I approached but did not smile or offer a greeting.

"Hi. Um. I need information about gardening." I said.

Immediately she replied, "Do you need something specific to gardening in Alaska?"

I kept my answer brief, as I assume a patron would for this straightforward question. "Yeah."

“Okay. You’ll find that in the Alaska section in the 635s.” She had replied immediately, without performing any sort of search or referring to any call number chart. Apparently this was a question the woman heard a lot.

Here she proceeded to give me what I perceived to be very convoluted directions that involved locating an elevator, going up one floor, walking through a section to locate a hidden hallway, and finding another elevator at the end of the hallway to go down one floor. I learned later that though the Alaska section was housed on the same level, the only access point was from above. Though I doubt her directions could have been better, a map and better signage would have been both helpful and much appreciated.

“If you have trouble finding it when you get there, look for the librarian in the glassed in space,” she said as she concluded our transaction. I would later learn through some sleuthing that this woman was a paraprofessional staff member rather than a full librarian. This desk, since it was for the fiction section, was no longer staffed by a librarian due to budget constraints. Another reference desk upstairs in front of the reference section continues to be staffed by librarians but I suspect that few people start inquiries there due to it being isolated and far from the entrance. I did not inquire about staffing in the juvenile section of the library.

I then made my best attempt to locate the hard-to-find Alaska section, having to stop at the reference area desk on the second floor to get more directions mid-way. Eventually I entered the beautiful cylindrical room with vaulted ceilings and noted the pleasant sunburst layout, with a central reading area surrounded by rows of shelving extending in nearly every direction. To the right of the entry there was an attractive wooden counter that I would have assumed was a reference desk if it were not entirely devoid of computers, reference materials, and staff. Seeing no one remotely resembling an employee, I began looking around for the “glassed in area” for the reference librarian. Along the wall on one side, I found two neighboring offices with large windows facing the reading room and stacks.

The door to the left was open and a man was sitting at the desk with his side facing me. A plaque on the door read, “Alaska Librarian.”

“Excuse me. I am looking for someone who can help me,” I stated quietly.

He politely replied, “Sure. What are you looking for?”

I repeated the question I had asked at the other desk. “I’m looking for information on gardening.” I decided not to mention that I had been referred here so that his response to me would not be affected by any assumptions he might make about whoever had helped me before.

“I’ll show you where the gardening books are,” he announced as he stood and walked past me out the door. I followed him into the stacks on the other side of the reading room. He began glancing

over the shelves presumably looking for books on gardening. I realized right away that we were in the wrong section because the books were obviously about forestry and because we were not in the 635 section where the woman had told me to look. Instead of correcting him, I stuck to my role of naïve user and began looking over the shelves with him.

He became more determined in his browsing, looking even more closely in the aisle we were in. “Hm. I was just out here the other day and I swear they were right here.” His search continued like this for a few more minutes before he finally gave up.

“Well, let’s go check the catalog,” he said and we returned to his office. He went in and sat down at his desk while I awkwardly stood in his doorway, unsure of whether going into his private space would be appropriate. I could not see his computer screen and he made no attempt to include me in the search. He let me stand there for a few minutes as he silently searched the catalog.

“Okay, here we go.” This time he led me directly to the correct section, almost an entire column of books in the 635 call number range all on the topic of gardening in the North. After pointing out the shelves, he concluded our interaction by saying, “Have fun!” as he turned and walked away.

Since my goal for this visit was to find out about how to successfully grow bell peppers in the Alaskan climate in pots, I decided to continue my experience as a novice user by actually locating my information by browsing the section he had referred me to. I started scanning titles looking for something that sounded like it would have the kind of information I wanted. I found one with vegetables in the title but discovered it was about growing plants in the ground and not in pots. It also lacked an index and I couldn’t find anything about peppers specifically. I started pulling books out randomly but found that most of them were about flower gardening and aesthetic gardening. After about thirty minutes of browsing shelves, looking through tables of contents, and checking indices, I finally found a book that addressed my question.

## **Reflection**

Many crucial aspects of the reference interview were neglected in my interactions with the reference staff. This reduced the ease and increased the length of time of finding my answer. It also left me with a very neutral feeling toward the library and its staff. Had I not known what I do about a proper reference interview, I would have thought the transaction itself went well enough but that it wasn’t any better than finding the information on my own elsewhere. If this had been my first library experience, I think the next time I had a question I would just Google it or ask a friend to help me find the information online, as many people do (Katz, 2001, p. 11).

An analysis of my reference experience using the Reference and User Services Association *Guidelines* (2004) and the standard format for a reference interview as outlined in Cassell and Hiremath (2006) and other sources shows that the reference staff member and librarian both failed to conduct a proper interview.

My reference experience was flawed from the start. Neither the reference staff person nor the librarian did very well in the area of approachability, in large part because of building and furniture design. I was unable to see the help desk staff due to the positioning of her computer monitor. Moving it just a foot or two in either direction would have made her visible to anyone entering the library. The signage in this area of the library was excellent, making it very clear that one can ask questions there. In the Alaska area, leaving an inviting desk vacant while sending users to find an office felt like a poor choice. Though the librarian was available to help, he didn't seem to be. Both the staff member and librarian looked up from their work immediately when I was at their desks but neither gave inviting glances or body language to invite my question. If I had been reluctant to ask either of them, I believe I would have gone unnoticed. Also, I initiated the verbal conversation with both parties. Cassell and Hiremath (2006) emphasize the importance of being approachable in "establishing rapport with the user" (p. 17). Approachability is the first of the 5 reference service *Guidelines* (RUSA, 2004). This includes being available, "ready to engage" users, and acknowledging patrons as they approach (p. 1).

Another aspect of establishing rapport is showing interest in a user's question (Cassell & Hiremath, p. 18). I did not feel that either person helping me cared much about my question. I felt like they cared more about moving me along, despite the fact that neither had other patrons waiting for their assistance. The *Guidelines* state that showing interest is as simple as making eye contact, focusing on the patron, and making "brief comments or questions" to show understanding (Section 2.5). Though both of my helpers did these things, the fact that they failed to ask questions to clarify my need contributed to a feeling of lack of interest.

This leads to the next and perhaps the most striking failure of my reference interview. The help desk staff member made one attempt to clarify my information need by asking if I needed Alaska specific information but no additional effort beyond that. The reference librarian made even less of an attempt, asking no questions nor making any clarifying remarks during the entire process. In either case, the lack of open-ended questioning meant that my true information need (growing green peppers in pots in Alaska) was never identified. The RUSA *Guidelines* (2004) identify this step as the most important part of the reference interview. The *Guidelines* state:

The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process. The librarian must be effective in identifying the patron's information needs and must do so in a manner that keeps patrons at ease. (Section 3.0)

This stage of listening and inquiring, as identified by the *Guidelines*, requires the reference librarian to listen to the entire question, rephrase the question to ensure understanding, and ask open-ended questions that “encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information” (Section 3.7). Cassell and Hiremath (2006) call the back and forth exchange of the reference interview “negotiating the question” (p. 18). They agree with the RUSA Guidelines and emphasize the importance of determining the nature and scope of the information need by asking neutral, open-ended questions (pp. 18-19). Dewdney and Michell (1996) argue that open-ended questioning is also essential for establishing context and clearing up any misunderstandings between patron and librarian (p. 1).

The Alaska librarian failed yet again in respect to searching as part of the reference process. He adopted a poor strategy for locating books on the topic by going out to the stacks without first checking the system. Had he gone to the correct location initially, skipping this process may not have been so vital. However, he failed to locate the items this way, and continued to waste time looking for the item manually even after realizing he wasn't in quite the right spot. By skipping the search step, he also missed a valuable opportunity to show me how to do a simple catalog search. He again passed up the opportunity to educate me when he returned to his office to silently perform his search. A layman user may not have had any idea what he was doing on the computer, though I can presume that he was in the local library catalog using search terms such as “gardening” and “Alaska.” Both the RUSA committee (2004) and Cassell and Hiremath (2006) discuss the process of searching as a vital element of the reference process because it is the stage in which the user is connected with the information. Developing a search strategy, explaining the methods and sources used and why, and checking with patron to make sure the search is on track are some of the necessary components of the search process identified in both sources (RUSA, Sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7; Cassell & Hiremath, pp. 20-21).

The reference librarian ended our transaction so abruptly that I felt rather abandoned in the stacks. Cassell and Hiremath (2006) state that the interaction must end in a way that does not make “the patron feel summarily dismissed” but this was exactly how I felt (p. 21; see also RUSA, 2004, Section 5.9). He failed entirely to follow up or close the reference interview properly. He should have asked whether or not I felt my question had been answered (Cassell & Hiremath, p. 21; RUSA, Section 5.1), or even if this was what I had been looking for. He also should have ended the conversation with an invitation to return to him if I needed additional assistance (Cassell & Hiremath, p. 21; RUSA, Section 5.2). Rather, I felt anything but welcome to ask him more questions.

Later I went back to perform the search on my own to see how much easier it would have been if my question had been properly identified and searched. A two minute search of the catalog using the terms “Alaska,” “gardening,” and “vegetable” gave me three specific titles to check. It took another two minutes to locate and pull those three titles. It took another five minutes of looking inside the books to discover that two of the three ultimately had information on growing bell peppers as well as information specific to growing vegetables in pots. If the librarian had started by clarifying my query and performing a catalog search, I could have had my answer in about ten minutes rather than forty. This of course does not address the brief amount of time it may have taken to find the information online or in a resource other than a book.

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