



# Reference Desk Reflection: Promoting "User Empowerment and Autonomy" through the Reference Interview

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This winter I had the opportunity to shadow reference providers at NYU libraries, observing reference providers working in-person at the Bobst Library reference desk and virtually through the Ask a Librarian chat service. Entering this experience, I was invited to reflect upon "critical praxis" in reference services; conversations and observations led me to focus on how reference providers pursue instructional aims, including user empowerment and autonomy, in reference transactions. As Jacoby et al. state, "Seeking to discover a link between reference and instructional services is not new;" I do not propose any highly original ideas, but hope to contribute my perspective as an LIS student to the conversation.<sup>[1]</sup>

Throughout my time shadowing, I often considered the teaching role of the reference provider as it relates to helping users "find and navigate" resources. When a person approaches the desk asking "for information on..." a topic, what resources or knowledge should they have by the end of the interaction? How can the reference provider help the user understand potential tools and strategies to find and evaluate information? What tools and resources are available to reference providers and library users, and what form can "information" take? Reference providers may suggest a book or a journal article, but they might also share a libguide, suggested search terms, or the contact information of a specialist librarian, and encourage patrons to use these resources.

Introductory reference classes teach library and information science students about the "reference interview," defined by American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) as "a structured conversation to ascertain and respond to a

library user's information need,"<sup>[4]</sup> not simply as providing a response to a search query. Especially in an academic library, instruction is central to the reference interview; providers are encouraged to include "teachable moments," or brief instances of instruction, in reference interviews.<sup>[3]</sup>

Literature on the reference interview often states that students come to reference expecting immediate answers,<sup>[4]</sup> explaining a "tension between the patron's request for the librarian to give them an answer and the librarian's desire to teach the patron the skills to help them answer their own questions."<sup>[5]</sup> Others have found that academic library users (appear to) appreciate when "librarians treat the reference interview as a collaboration between equals."<sup>[6]</sup> The ALA's "Reference And User Services Association's Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers" encouraged reference providers to provide instruction throughout the reference interview, and to engage in many of the practices I saw reference providers engaging in. When reference providers clearly demonstrated their willingness to help students, I witnessed students ready to respond in kind.

NYU Libraries' Reference Services mission statement begins with "engag[ing] NYU library patrons in finding, navigating, and using resources and tools to address their research needs" reference providers do not simply find answers to questions; they help users to better understand the tools at their disposal.<sup>[7]</sup> Reference Services is located within the department of Teaching, Learning, and Engagement, and reference providers engage in a variety of instruction and outreach activities in addition to staffing the desk, chat, and email services.

One of the Reference Services department's priorities is "User Empowerment and Autonomy;" while shadowing, providers described and demonstrated several related practices helpful to promoting this, among other aims. Reference providers consistently encouraged users to think about different search strategies, always gave context and explanations for information, and frequently encouraged users to reach out to specialist librarians. These techniques encourage user autonomy. Users learn about library resources for current or future use and empowerment. They are invited to make decisions throughout the reference interview; the reference provider does not dictate which resources the person can use.

Reference providers provide instruction while helping patrons (re)formulate search strategies, "solicit[ing] the user to come up with [their] own answers."<sup>[8]</sup> At the reference desk and over chat, I watched as reference providers encouraged patrons to think through variations on keywords, providing guidance and suggestions to help the user try out different search techniques. The focus on Searching in RUSA's Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers aligns with NYU Libraries' notion of "user empowerment and reference". Outlining how "the library worker...invites the person to contribute their ideas throughout the reference interaction... [and] gets the individual started on the initial steps of their research"<sup>[9]</sup> these guidelines encourage a "co-created interaction."<sup>[10]</sup> At the Bobst reference desk, the dual-monitor setup allows the reference provider and patron to see the same screen and to navigate the library website together.

Another method of providing teachable moments and encouraging user autonomy is always explaining and providing context for information, clearly and without jargon. Whenever a reference provider showed or sent a user a piece of information—anything from a map of Bobst at desk or sending a link to a libguide in the chat - they always explained where they found this information. I was told to always provide context when sending links (to webpages, libguides, journal articles) and briefly explain how they may be relevant to the user's query. Explaining how you found an information resource by saying "here's where to find the different call numbers in the library..." instead of "The PNs are on the 8th floor" enables library patrons to understand the tools at their disposal.

NYU Libraries patrons are frequently encouraged to reach out to their subject specialist librarian. One technique I witnessed multiple times was providing users with potential tools (links to relevant databases and libguides alongside a brief explanation) accompanied by the contact information for a librarian specializing in that area. If a librarian specialized in business receives a question about health sciences, they would be able to point the user to databases and other tools, but knowing that there are librarians specialized in health sciences, they might encourage the user to reach out to that person.

The structure of the library shapes, in a sense, the structure of reference services, and the capabilities of reference providers. Reference librarians can only point students towards resources (including books and journal articles but also subject specialists, and library guides) if they exist and are accessible to users. Instruction, user empowerment, and autonomy can be an important focus of the reference interview, but this can also take place through instruction sessions, workshops, and other practices. For patrons to approach the reference desk, in person or online, they must be aware of this service; practices including instruction sessions and outreach can help familiarize users with reference services. Providing a multi-modal approach to reference and taking the time to share and explain information about library services and resources is possible with adequate staffing. Having librarians specialized in various fields allows reference providers to make referrals, and to offer research consultations on a wide variety of highly specialized topics.

While my shadowing was limited to Bobst library, I am eager to learn more about how reference operates in other academic libraries, understanding that, "reference librarians must be prepared to adapt to the needs of the users at each particular institution."<sup>[11]</sup> Ongoing conversations with reference providers at different academic libraries has led me to believe that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. At an institution with fewer staff or without as many subject specialists, reference providers might not have the option of referring patrons to colleagues for more in-depth research consultations.<sup>[12]</sup>

The invitation to write this reflection encouraged me to consider one aspect of reference services—encouraging user autonomy and empowerment through the reference interview. This can only be achieved, I believe, thanks to other practices and resources, including people, services and material, offered by the library. It is important to consider practices, techniques, and aims of reference within the context of a large academic

library with the resources capable of sustaining multiple modalities of teaching, learning, and engagement. I agree that "enabling users to find information independently is positive,"<sup>[13]</sup> so long as they feel they are supported, and not dismissed, by reference providers and other library staff.

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- [1] JoAnn Jacoby, David Ward, Susan Avery, and Emilia Marcyk, "The Value of Chat Reference Services: A Pilot Study," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* (Baltimore, Md.) 16, no. 1 (2016): 111.
- [2] American Library Association Reference and User Services Association. "Definitions of Reference," effective December 13, 2021.
- [3] Kern, M. Kathleen Kern, "The Reference Interview Revisited," in *Reimagining Reference in the 21st Century*, ed. David A. Tyckoson and John G. Dove (Purdue University Press, 2014), 61-64; Jacoby et al. "Value of Chat Reference Services," 118, 120-121.
- [4] Ronald Martin Solorzano, "Adding Value at the Desk: How Technology and User Expectations Are Changing Reference Work," *The Reference librarian* 54, no. 2 (2013): 96.
- [5] Tammy Bobrowsky, Lynne Beck, and Malaika Grant, "The Chat Reference Interview: Practicalities and Advice," *The Reference librarian* 43, no. 89-90 (2005): 186.
- [6] Solorzano, "Adding Value at the Desk," 97; see also Jacoby et al., "Value of Chat Reference Services," 120-121.
- [7] NYU Libraries. "Reference Services." Accessed February 14, 2025.
- [8] Kern, "Reference Interview Revisited," 66, see also 69; Jacoby et al., "Value of Chat Reference Services," 116, 118; Solorzano, "Adding Value at the Desk," 92.
- [9] American Library Association Reference and User Services Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," 2023, 4.2, 4.8.
- [10] "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," Preface.
- [11] Solorzano, "Adding Value at the Desk," 90.
- [12] Jacoby 122-123.
- [13] Kern, "Reference Interview Revisited," 62.

### Author Bio:

*June Elizabeth Ofstedal is a student in the dual-degree program, pursuing an MA in French Studies alongside the MSLIS. She is very interested in reference and instruction, and hopes to work in an academic library combining her interests in the humanities, education, and library work.*