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Library 210

 Reference Interview Paper

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Sorting School Data: Help Wanted!

Time is my most valuable commodity. This is a central guiding factor in my information seeking procedures, and played a role in my choice of information query. As a teacher leader at a California public high school I have the responsibility of generating a visitation list for use by our restructuring committee. I began in late summer, but once school started the daunting quantities of unsorted data encouraged me to procrastinate. I decided to make this task my research question for the interaction assignment.

My information need is specific: To each reference librarian I described the purpose of the list I wanted and gave the name and address of my school. I then asked for a list of public, comprehensive, open access (not charter or magnet schools) California high schools which are very closely comparable to the high school where I teach—in previous state test score ranges, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors, and which have significantly raised academic achievement in state described subgroups. I also told each librarian or expert that I had already looked at some data but especially needed to know how to sort or filter the data.

After seeing the listing on our class assignments page, I started with the "Ask an Expert" links on the Educator's Reference Desk. Among the experts listed was a contact at the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). I sent my question on a Friday evening at 11:10 PM from a hotel room. I received an answer on Monday morning from Dr. Ronald J. Dietel, Assistant Director for Research Use & Communications at the National Center for Research and Evaluation of Standards and Student Testing at UCLA. Dr. Dietel wrote that he didn't know anyone at the National Center with enough knowledge of specific high schools. He gave me some of his personal ideas about methods which can raise achievement in high schools, including the importance of using and examining data, which I thought was iron. Dr. Dietel's credentials were impressive, and, in fact, he showed an interest

in my problem and invited me to contact him for further discussion of strategies. I learned, however, that an expert is not a librarian. Dr. Dietel felt no responsibility to provide me with any guidance or tools which would help me answer my specific question; he didn't provide a reference experience suitable for this paper.

Having learned this lesson, I next turned to the King Library "Ask A Librarian" service. To access this service, I had to provide the name of my local library. I cut and pasted in the same question I had sent to Dr. Dietel, and about 90 seconds later received a response from Abby, who identified herself as a "reference librarian with the QuestionPoint chat service". She asked me to tell her what sources I had already found so that she would not duplicate my search. I told her I had looked at the testing data on the California Department of Education website, but did not find a way to sort and filter the data as I wanted. I waited about 50 seconds. Abby then listed very quickly several websites I could check, including the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the Rand site. In 33 seconds she gave me two major websites to search—these websites showed on my screen as well as being listed in her text message. At this 33-second point I typed back, seeking to emphasize the importance to me of this part of my query: "These look great. Can you give me some guidance on entering comparisons?" She immediately sent back an additional database suggestion and pointed out the education research guide at SJSU. Twenty seconds later she responded, "You would need to search by the parameters socioeconomic and ethnic makeup". I thanked her and ended the approximately 7 minute exchange. A few minutes later I received a very helpful email transcript of the entire exchange, complete with links to the databases we had discussed.

Several days later I drove the approximately 25 miles to the Sonoma State University Library in the Jean and Charles M. Schulz Information Center. On the ground floor there were

multiple desks and counters set up for assistance under various large signs, including

"Services", "Help Desk", and "Learning Commons", but making my way to the second floor I

saw as I entered the "Reference" desk directly in front of me at the end of the broad passage.

The librarian could see me coming from thirty feet or more away. By the time I reached her

desk she had adjusted her monitor so it was visible from my side of the desk, and also stood to

greet me. She introduced herself as "Liz", and, although I don't remember if we have ever

spoken, I recognized her as a very pleasant-looking librarian I have seen at SSU for many

years. I described my need much as I had done in my digital encounters, though initially

without listing the specific comparisons I wanted to make. Liz said that she was not an expert

in educational research, but Erin, who was also an SSU librarian, was. She phoned Erin,

described my need, and asked if she should send me up; Erin said she would come down. Liz

said this would be a good thing because she would be able to learn about this search also. We

waited approximately 8 minutes for Erin. During the first minutes of this time Liz showed me

the Education Research Guide that Erin had created for SSU, and encouraged me to start there

next time. She also showed me a few of the other pathway guides they had created, including

one on Music History and one on Literature. While I was waiting I copied down several of the

major links listed on the SSU Education Research Guide, including Dataquest, Ed-data, and

the CDE STAR test results link which I had previously used. Erin, in her late 20's, came out of

an office down the hall and sat in a chair next to me in front of the reference desk. She

swiveled the monitor all the way around and opened several of the websites to show me their

contents. She showed me lists of schools on the suggested websites, and how they could be

sorted by state, county, district, etc. At this point I repeated part of what I had said to Liz—

that I was especially interested in filtering the data to show results from schools similar to

mine. I described my use of the US Census website for a needs survey in another class. Using the Census site it was possible to apply many parameters to the data—for example, the size of town, or percentage of ethnicity above or below a chosen number. I asked her if she knew of an education database I could search like this. She shook her head no. She said with a rueful tone that my task would involve "just looking at a lot of schools and maybe doing some guessing based on what you've heard". I said, "So there really is no way to filter this data." She said there really wasn't, and I concluded by saying that now I did not feel so dumb for failing to figure out how to do it. I was at the reference desk over 15 minutes. I received the good suggestions for research sources which were also available on the Education Reference Guide, and the librarians did focus specifically on my interest in sorting data for close comparison; however, they contended there was not a mechanism for doing that besides a general examination of California high schools. They expressed some sympathy for me in completing the large and tedious task ahead.

When judging the two exchanges on the basis of efficient use of time and resources, the experiences were not even close. I accessed the QuestionPoint librarian from my home, at around 10 PM. I was wearing my pajamas and eating a snack. The entire exchange lasted approximately 8 minutes. To work with the Sonoma State librarians I had to schedule time in my day while the library was open, drive 40 miles round-trip in my gas-fueled vehicle, and pay to park. If these portions of the effort are counted, the in-person experience required almost an hour and a half; considering only the actual exchange, it still took almost twice as long as the online experience, and certainly cost far more. However, in some ways the actual librarians were more convenient for me.

Since I had scheduled the time for the college library research, and met the librarians in a place devoted to such tasks, I did not have to contend with all the family interruptions and household business which encroached on my online encounter. Also, in some ways the online librarian was actually too quick for convenience. She showed me the sources in such rapid succession that I was not able to discern which might best meet my needs, or to ask her specific questions about how to manipulate their data. I relied on the written transcript I would be sent to provide me a pathway back to the sites. The speed of the entire transaction created a sense that my inquiry time was rationed and running out. I felt discouraged from asking follow-up questions, and Abby didn't give me any reassuring openings to do so, such as "Do you need more information about…" or "Do you now feel ready to use this information?" Questions like these would have been the equivalent of unhurried body language. In the end, my question was not answered. I received excellent suggestions for sources, but no guidance on sorting.

In the face-to-face experience, no sense of urgency was communicated. This was good in that it made me feel comfortable rephrasing and following up on my question, but bad in that I wasted too much time waiting for the second librarian to appear. It was much easier to persist toward my information goal when dealing with the librarians I could see. In person it is easy to notice if someone is impatient or harried, and to then adjust as appropriate. I could feel that the amount of time I was using was well within the norm for an inquiry; no one else was waiting and the librarians seemed relaxed. It was also more obvious in person when my question needed clarification—that I needed more help with sorting data than with finding it--and to rephrase accordingly.

Analyzing the types of sources provided by the two different reference support providers, it is perhaps not surprising that the nationally operating QuestionPoint service suggested national

data sites--NCES and Rand, while the local university librarians give me three sites which were all linked to the California Department of Education. My question did specifically asked about California public high school, so the sites chosen by the SSU librarians were more narrowly relevant, but California data sites may also be their more frequent recommendations. Though they are more broad, further examination may reveal the national sites to be more accessible and versatile, which would make them more useful recommendations. Overall, both library formats recommended strong sources for data and provided little guidance for accessing that data.

Several issues which affected my experience are discussed in reference literature. In a 2006 article on digital reference overload, Reichardt and Cox observe that, just as users are drowning in information overload, reference staff is drowning in a surfeit of sources, which the authors feel results in the urge to give too many sources (p. 107). Focusing on my experience, it would have been much more helpful if the QuestionPoint librarian had provided just one strong source, and had then given guidelines on how to manipulate it—the same amount of time could have been devoted, and it would have produced a more targeted answer to my question. Reichardt and Cox speculate that too many sources "could result in feelings of anxiety and inundation, leaving the user overwhelmed and not sure where to begin; ironically, it could return the user back to the start of the reference interview" (p. 111), a fair description of the disposition of my question. The article also suggests creation of resource guides as a way to control the deluge of questions, which both of the libraries through which I posed my question had done, and both of my reference contacts pointed out I could have used (p. 108).

An article on triage—the initial sorting of reference questions--was also relevant to my experience. According to the author, three factors are considered when questions are routed to appropriate "answerers": those specific to the question, such as the subject of the question; those reflecting the abilities of the answerer, such as subject expertise; and factors specific

to the reference service, such as the scope of the service's collection (Pomerantz, 2004, p. 251). The article, which examined both human decision making and algorithmically derived question direction, listed the SJSU contracted service, QuestionPoint, as one of the reference services using algorithms (p. 240). The longest wait I had after sending my question was the 90 seconds before the librarian answered me in live text. I can assume that during that time my question was subjected to an electronic assessment and routing, which resulted in my connection with a librarian who was fully prepared with a barrage of experience, resources and expertise—a benefit, certainly, but also perhaps contributing to the generally rushed and generic responses I received. Conversely, my face-to-face question was also triaged, though by human decision, being routed to a more appropriate librarian by phone and foot, in a somewhat leisurely fashion. According to Pomerantz (2004), the "attributes of the question itself" determine what disposal decision a human router will make, with subject being the primary factor, difficulty the second, and the generality or specificity of the question the third (p. 251). My online question went quickly to the education expert. In the real world library, the initial librarian considered the entire question in directing my query, so that the subsequent exchange not only brought me to the right librarian, but also focused on my efforts to reorganize data. The in-person question process was again directed in a way that supported the renegotiation of my question as discussed by Taylor (1968) in our class readings (p. 183). The reformulation of the question to move data sorting to the center was much easier in my face-to-face encounter.

Another interesting article on reference work by Chad E. Buckley (2006) evokes the Golden Rule as a guide for dealing with information seekers. Taylor (1968) makes insightful mention of "the sense of Puritanism" which can affect reference work (p.188). As described earlier, all of the librarians I worked with pointed out to me the pre-existing library reference guide reminders. This made me feel very guilty. In this case my guilt came from the fact that I

was creating extra work for these women under somewhat false pretenses (though I don't know how to disaggregate CDE data, I do know to check the research guides in a library), but I would certainly have felt the same guilt if they had shown me the guides and I really hadn't known about them--I would then have felt that I had not prepared myself properly or done my fair share of the work. The message I received from the reminders was that I could have used those great resources myself and not bothered the busy librarians. In the division between the "give a man a fish' and the 'teach a man to fish' practitioners, both sets of librarians I dealt with made the decision to use prime answering time for showing me the fishing pole. Buckley (2006) commented well on this tendency: "The Golden Rule does not mean that we do a patron's work for them and abdicate all responsibility for teaching them how to use the library, but it does require that we be sensitive to their needs and desires at that moment" (p. 134). This article also reminds reference staff: try not to judge (p. 133). Certainly it puts the librarian in a difficult position if patrons will interpret all attempts at education as disapproval, but, as I can testify, some patrons are touchy in this area. In my experience, wording and timing of the reminder could mitigate that sense of reproach. For example, rather than beginning by showing me what I should have done, either librarian could have used the research guide as a closing device, directing me to check in there as an added resource if I found myself with further questions or needs.

Completing this assignment was uncomfortable for me, and a few insights in Buckley's (2006) article helped me understand why. Taylor's sense of Puritanism exists not only in the librarian, but also in the user. The Golden Rule "…assumes that others want the same things we do, which may not always be true" (Buckley, 2006, p. 135). I don't know how common my emotional response is among users, but I realized in completing this assignment something perhaps odd for a library science student—I have always regarded the need to consult the librarian as a sort of failure on my part. I seem to feel that asking a reference librarian for help is

either a sign of intellectual defeat or a sort of shirking, foisting off on some other busy person work I could have done myself. Even the fact that my question did contain a genuine need which I had not been able to meet on my own did not relieve me of the small emotional burden of these feelings. The Golden Rule as adapted for reference librarians recommends they "use whatever clues are available and empathize" (Buckley, 2006, p.131), but I never felt that anyone was aware of my mild discomfort, which should perhaps have been apparent at least to the physically present librarians. Though they were friendly and polite, I sensed the habitual patient condescension which may come from years of working with undergraduates. They discounted my disclosed background information, dress, age, and manner, when with a few simple words I could have been acknowledged as a fellow adult professional dealing with a complex practical task. In the case of the online librarian, the phrasing and focus of my question provided ample clues that this information need came from a working public educator, and the response could have been framed in a way more specifically directed to that audience. Buckley (2006) observes that virtual librarians can still incorporate many of the tools which demonstrate active listening in face-to-face encounters—rephrasing the question, seeking more details about the need, asking if needs have been met before ending (p.132). Buckley's advice was relevant to my experience— more attention to the details of my inquiry would have created more understanding of my ultimate information need and decreased my guilt.

After complaining that both reference encounters left me with a sense of having been chided, it almost feels unfair to note also that both experiences were in some ways not emotional enough. A problem with non-judgmental responses is mentioned in our class reading by Durrance (1995): the impression may be created that the librarian is not interested in the question presented (252). Durrance described the exciting interaction between a younger patron and the

children's librarian, as they became a dynamic team investigating a common interest. She contrasted this to the lack of involvement evinced by a librarian responding to the young patron's mother who presented a similar query. The mother noted that the children's librarian appeared "not willing to end the interview till the young man had received appropriate material and assistance" (260). Perhaps not surprisingly, my California testing data focus led to an experience more similar to that of the mother. The only person who seemed at all intrigued by my topic was my earliest responder, Dr. Dietel, who was not a librarian with multiple reference questions to answer, and whose interest was very broad and theoretical. Once again the speed of the online responses and the implacable advancement of the librarian's line of questioning left me little room to reassert my specific interest, and gave the impression of a preformulated answer which did not acknowledge my actual predicament. Sadly, the warmest moments of human exchange came when Erin and Liz commiserated with me over the task which lay ahead as they could offer me no way to filter the available statistics. The conversation was friendly and unhurried, but it also was distancing, revealing how we had failed to become a team on a quest. They had offered sources; I was left with an undiminished task. Their sympathy was distancing, seeming to emphasize that they had now washed their hands of my problem.

Using Durrance's (1995) "willingness to return" test, I would not be sanguine in turning to the "Ask an Expert" service again (245). Based on my one experience only, I was reminded that though knowledgeable experts are often enthusiastic, they may not be service-oriented, and may not feel a strong responsibility to provide the questioner with what has been specifically requested. I would definitely use QuestionPoint through the SJSU library again because of its amazing flexibility and convenience, but I would break my question down into steps so I could be sure all parts were addressed. I would also hope that with familiarity would come more of the

confidence required for retaining control of the process. In spite of the fact that the face-to-face encounter made it much easier for me to reformulate my question towards a definitive, if unsatisfactory answer, I probably would use the online service again in lieu of the time and fuel-consuming drive. Taylor (1968) writes that ease of access to an information system is more important to users than the amount or quality of information generated; I seem to be reflecting his observation (p. 181)

When I wrote to the expert, even though I felt guilty at passing off the task, I actually imagined he might generate a comparison chart for me using some professional tool he had at hand. When I wrote out my question to the online librarian, I thought she might show me how to use data-sorting tools on various sites. When I visited the real-world library, I thought, with the extra time available, I might learn how to organize data on at least one common site. As the encounters repeated, I lowered my expectations based on past experience. As the interviews became more proximate, I was more aware of the resources and parameters of the service accessed—the factor Pomerantz (2004) discussed as specific to the resources of the collection (p. 251). I was better able to judge what I might reasonably expect as an outcome from the information request. Still, I was surprised to be told that a tool such as I sought was not available, and I have not yet accepted this as a final answer. My next step will be to seek a face-to-face encounter with an academic reference librarian who works with databases in a California education bureaucracy, such as the California Department of Education. This person should successfully combine the advantages of each of my reference contacts.

References

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