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L524: Information Sources and Services  
Spring, 2001

**Observation Project:**

**The Monroe County Public Library Children's  
Department**

**And**

**The Indiana University Education Library**

## I. Literature Search

Cramer, Dina C. "How to Speak Patron." Public Libraries 37.6 (1998): 349.

Brief but effective discussion of how librarians can misunderstand patrons, often because of differences between how librarians use certain words, and how library users think of those same words (e.g., "reference book"). Two important points made: "we must interpret what library users mean and we must speak in a manner that they can understand"; and "The burden of identifying [misunderstandings] and untangling them is on the librarian."

Dewdney, Patricia, and Gillian Michell. "Oranges and Peaches: Understanding Communication Accidents in the Reference Interview." RQ 35.4 (1996): 520-536.

Scholarly, more technical dissection of same problem; part of research done by the authors with a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The authors use examples of reference interactions culled from several sources (interviews with librarians, transcriptions of recorded reference interviews, and anecdotes both conveyed in person and culled from LIBREF-L) to classify different types of misunderstandings between librarians and patrons ("communication accidents") and suggest strategies for dealing with miscommunications. In the strategies section, they stress the social aspect of the reference question, pointing out that the initial form of the question often comes from the users' desire to be assured that they are in the right place, are asking the right person, that they have that person's attention, and that the person will be able to help them.

## II. Observation Sessions

### 1. Monroe County Public Library

Children's Department, rear "Ask Your Questions Here" desk

Saturday, April 7, 2001 11AM-1PM

Contact person: Patricia Callison

One librarian and an intern were staffing the reference desk while I was there.

Unfortunately, they were having an unusually slow Saturday in the Children's Dept., as they ruefully explained to me when I arrived. This did allow us time for library- and librarianship-related conversation, and they helpfully volunteered to discuss their reference activities with me.

There are two reference desks in the Children's Dept. at MCPL, because the space is so large: one in front, closer to the Kirkwood Ave. library entrance, and one in back, where the Homework Center, Program Room and Audio-Visual section are located. Three Internet stations and two database terminals are situated by the Homework Center as well. I sat at a carrel next to the reference desk in back, where I could see and hear people coming up to the desk, and where I could talk with the staff when they were free and had something they wanted to share with me. It was sometimes difficult to hear what was happening at the desk, because the acoustics of the space tend to "swallow" sound and not let it carry far (a good thing in a library) and because of the background noise of the air circulation system.

The librarian (Lisa) and the intern (Krista) told me a little about the types of questions they are asked. Reference work in the Children's Dept. does not consist exclusively of helping children with homework problems. Librarians there also hear from adults who want answers to basic questions; and they get a lot of graphic designers—and tattoo artists—looking for images in picture books. They help a

surprising number of IU students and faculty as well, and not just from the School of Education.

At the reference desks they keep a handwritten reference questions log in a simple notebook. Codes in the margin designate the source of a question (blank if face-to-face; T for telephone, E for e-mail, W for web) and the result (blank if successful, a minus mark if the info was not available in the Children's Dept., a plus sign if the book was available elsewhere in MCPL but was checked out, etc.). Sample questions in the log for April 7: "Death/dying for 8 yr. old"; "Where is main A-V?"

A boy about eleven years old came up to the desk asking about ships and ship-building. Krista spent several minutes working with him on the question, first running a search in the catalog, then going with him to different locations in the stacks, showing him where things were and making sure he found what he needed. She was friendly, courteous and helpful without being pushy, and wasn't impatient about criss-crossing the Children's Dept. to help him find good material. During their conversation she learned that not only did he need books about ships for his school assignment, but that he was personally interested in the history of ship-building and wanted to see pictures of different styles of sailing ships. He was also interested in books about the Titanic. She found out about and helped him with not only his homework requirements, but his own interests outside of the assignment.

A man came to the desk asking something I didn't quite catch about a book that he *thought* a woman might have called to reserve for him earlier in the week. He wasn't sure of his facts, but wanted to check to see if the book was there. After asking questions to be sure of what book he was looking for and when the call took place (Monday), Lisa explained that while they do keep track of reference questions, she didn't see anything

about the book he was looking for in the log for Monday. She was courteous and sympathetic, and he was understanding, aware that his own information about the situation was incomplete.

Krista received a call from the main desk, and then a girl about 8 years old came running back for help with a question on a particular National Park in Alaska (for a school assignment). Again, Krista gave detailed personal attention to the question, trying several avenues of approach that initially came up empty or rather scant, and finally discovering that the Internet had the best details that the girl needed for her schoolwork (together they found the site for the National Parks System, which had a link to good info on the particular park the girl needed to know about). Later, a woman came to the desk asking about a series of books of classic story tales (if I heard her correctly). After a few exchanges that seemed at first to be missing the mark, she clarified that it was a storytelling series, and not just a tale collection she was after.

All of the examples related here demonstrate the ability of the librarians in the MCPL Children's Dept. to "speak patron", to avoid communication accidents (and identify and correct them when they do occur) and to help people (adults and children) on their own terms.

**2. Indiana University Education Library**  
Sunday, April 8, 2001 5PM-7PM  
Contact person: Gwen Pershing

One student was staffing the "Ask ? Here" desk near the entrance to the library while I was there. This is not actually an open desk, but a small cubicle with half-height walls and a counter, putting the staffer in a sort of "well" when seated at the computer—not exactly inviting access (a key component of the social dynamic behind the reference

interview, per Dewdney and Michell). Tables are situated close to the reference desk for study groups. The conversations of the study groups, combined with the “swallowing” acoustics of the space, meant that I had difficulty hearing questions at the reference desk, although I was seated nearby. I could usually hear the staffer, but not always the patrons.

Much of the reference service I witnessed during my visit involved giving brief instruction in how to search for materials electronically. Almost invariably, the staffer began by asking, “How did you search for it?” or “Have you tried searching anything yet?” and ended by explaining where to find the appropriate database (or IUCAT itself) online and how to use it. While courteous and never patronizing or dismissive, when she turned to her computer for answers she tended not to talk to the patron or explain what she was doing while in the process of searching.

In one exchange, the staffer ascertained that the patron had searched IUCAT by keyword for her material, but hadn’t found it. After trying it herself and also failing, the staffer remembered to ask whether it was a full book the patron was looking for—no, it was an article in a book. The staffer then explained about how IUCAT is just for whole books, but you can find articles by searching the online databases; then she demonstrated her own search techniques (from down in her reference well). The student was grateful, and went off to the database terminal to try it herself. A few minutes later she was back, not knowing how to get to the database the staffer had been using; the staffer cheerfully came out and helped her get started at the terminal. Before long the student was printing out the results of her apparently successful search.

Two students came up and asked a question. In response to the staffer’s first query, they answered “We tried looking on the Internet, but....” The staffer performed a

silent search, at one point appearing stuck (resting with her hand over her mouth, looking at the computer screen). Finally she described how she had searched the database, explaining where to go and what to look for. The students verified that they should start from the Ed. Library webpage, and went off to do their search.

One woman who looked to be in her forties had a less happy time in the library. She was having trouble locating the items she had found in her online journal search. Where were these journals in the library? How could she figure out where they were at IU? The staffer explained briefly about looking things up in IUCAT and how location displays in IUCAT. This time, though, she did not do any searches for the patron to directly answer her question (i.e., to look up one of the journals for her and show her where it was). The patron still seemed stymied to me, but went away to try again on her own. She came back some time later, having been unsuccessful, not understanding the records in IUCAT. Once again the staffer clarified verbally without showing the patron anything on her computer, and without offering to come out and help the patron at the terminal. This was a bit odd considering the personal attention the staffer seemed perfectly willing to give other (younger?) patrons.

These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions the staffer answered, and the strategies she used to help her patrons. She clearly has good skills for communicating with students, but in at least one case did not offer the help the (older) patron clearly needed.