SERVING AT THE REFERENCE DESK

User Perspectives
on Staff Cooperation
During the Reference Transaction

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SUMMARY. Discussions of the reference transaction generally assume one staff member and one patron, but this is not always the case in practice. This paper reports on data collected from users' descriptions of public and academic library reference transactions in which more than one staff member played a part. It analyzes users' evaluations of effective and ineffective staff behavior in three aspects of the reference transaction: the initiation of the reference encounter, collaboration between staff members, and serial encounters with more than one staff member. It suggests some ways that guidelines for reference desk behavior might be extended to accommodate multi-staff transactions. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on cooperation and collaboration in reference service often focuses on institutional-level cooperation, e.g., between institutions and groups of users (*Reference Services Review*, 2001); between or among libraries (Hogan, 1996); or between libraries and other agencies such as schools (Kahn, 2000). At the level of the librarian-patron interaction, however, there is little emphasis on cooperation. Writing about the reference transaction and guidelines for reference service generally assume one staff member and one patron. Very little has been written about what might happen when more than two people are involved in a reference transaction.

Chelton (1999) observed that professionally recommended guidelines for library practice need to be studied in the context of real work, and called for "further studies observing and comparing what those who call themselves 'information professionals' actually do in practice." A small number of researchers have recently begun to consider the contribution of more than two people to the reference transaction. Melissa Gross's work on the imposed query (Gross 1995, 1998, 1999) acknowledges that the person asking a reference question–the *agent* (Gross and Saxton, 2001)–might not necessarily be the person wanting the answer–the *imposer* (Gross and Saxton, 2001). Gross (1998) offered suggestions for providing effective reference service for imposed queries and emphasized the importance of good question negotiation.

Less attention has been given to reference transactions in which more than one staff member is involved. Several writers have made recommendations about staff collaboration in the reference transaction. Kemp and Dillon (1988) discussed the value of staff collaboration as a strategy for improving the accuracy of reference service. Nolan (1992) advised that collaboration with a colleague, referral at the end of a reference transaction, and peer coaching are among the practical steps that staff could take to improve reference performance. Several of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals* (American Library Association, 1996) address consultation (e.g., Guidelines 4.8 and 5.4) and referral (e.g., Guidelines 4.17, 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8). Quinn (2001) considered relations between staff members in "double cover-

age" situations, in which more than one librarian is working at the desk at the same time. He reviewed the sociology and psychology literature on cooperation and competition, and made recommendations about using the findings from other disciplines to enhance relations between staff members working at the reference desk together. Quinn (2001) observed that "there is an implicit assumption that the two librarians may collaborate at times and assist one another in answering questions, thereby enhancing the quality of the reference service." He suggested that a study of cooperative and competitive behaviors are important because "a strongly cooperative relationship between two librarians can have a profound effect both on the quality of librarians' working lives and on the quality of reference services that the user receives . . . It is the user who ultimately stands to lose the most when librarians are unable to relate well to one another at the desk" (Quinn, 2001). Apart from Radford's (1998) analysis of the factors users rely on when choosing between staff members at the reference desk, however, it does not appear that multi-staff transactions have been studied systematically.

This paper contributes to the literature on the evaluation of user satisfaction with the reference transaction (Durrance, 1989) by reporting on data collected from users' descriptions of public and academic library reference transactions in which more than one staff member played a part. In some cases, users described these contributions as quite helpful to answering the question. In other cases, staff interaction was represented much less positively. This paper analyzes the characteristics of effective and ineffective staff consultation and collaboration in users' accounts and suggests ways that guidelines for effective reference desk behavior might be extended to accommodate situations with more than one staff member.

DATA COLLECTION

Since 1982, students in the Information Sources and Services course in The University of Western Ontario's MLIS program have completed a practical assignment in which they describe in detail their experiences as users of reference services. Students ask a personally relevant question at a reference desk in a public or academic library. The assignment report consists of an account of what happened during the library visit. Students are instructed to "include everything you did, said, and thought as well as everything that others said and did" and are asked to reflect on how they felt throughout the encounter, and on what

was helpful or unhelpful. In addition, students complete a brief questionnaire in which they specify the kind of library they visited, and rate reference staff friendliness and understanding of the question, helpfulness of the answer, satisfaction with the experience as a whole, and whether they would return to this staff member for another question.

To date, nearly 300 students have contributed their "Library Visit Reports" for ongoing faculty research. These reports, and similar assignments conducted at other library schools (Baker and Field, 2000), have provided the raw material for a number of analyses of effective and ineffective elements of the reference transaction (Ross and Dewdney, 1994, 1998; Dewdney and Ross, 1994; Ross and Nilsen, 2000). This article is based on an analysis of the 237 accounts collected between fall 1998 and spring 2001.

It is important to bear in mind that the data analyzed for this study consist of students' *accounts* of their reference encounters, not transcripts of the encounters themselves. It is possible that other students interacted with more than one staff member but neglected to describe this interaction in their reports. In addition, Dewdney and Ross (1994) observed that students completing this assignment described encountering a "lack of identifying cues by which professional librarians could be identified." Although student accounts almost universally speak of "librarians," it is likely that many of these encounters involved paraprofessional staff.

FINDINGS

Of the 237 accounts collected during this time period, 109 (46%) mentioned more than one staff member. The majority of these accounts (81, or 74% of multi-staff accounts) report the presence of more than one staff member but provide little detail. In some cases (36, or 33% of multi-staff descriptions), students simply mentioned that more than one staff member was on the desk. In others (45, or 41% of mentions of more than one staff member), they described independent serial encounters with staff members, e.g., when the user visited two different libraries or had unrelated discussions with two staff members: "After reading the article and taking notes, I asked another staff member what to do with the periodical." (Note: large public library.) As Ross and Dewdney (1998) have found, serial visits to staff members or libraries sometimes constitute a user's counter-strategy in the face of poor reference service. The present article, however, describes those accounts (37

accounts, or 33% of mentions of more than one staff member, or 15% of all accounts) that contain more substantive descriptions of multi-staff reference transactions.

Substantive descriptions of multi-staff encounters focus on three aspects of the reference transaction: the initiation of the reference encounter, collaboration between staff members, and serial encounters with more than one staff member. The remainder of this paper provides examples of these three aspects, and considers users' descriptions of the positive and negative forms of staff behavior associated with each, with a view to extending behavioral guidelines to accommodate the complexities of transactions in which more than one staff member takes part.

INITIATION OF THE REFERENCE TRANSACTION

Radford (1998) found that impressions based on the appearance and nonverbal behavior of staff members contribute to users' decisions to approach and initiate an interaction. One reason that users might choose to approach a particular staff member is that member's move to initiate an interaction. Both Dyson (1992) and Dewdney and Ross (1994) found that users consider initiation behavior (e.g., smiling, making and maintaining appropriate eye contact, greeting the user) a helpful element of a reference transaction. Both Radford (1998) and Dewdney and Ross (1994) identified staff conversations as a potential barrier to approachability: "The staff member . . . kept me waiting for several minutes while she talked to other librarians at the desk" (Dewdney and Ross, 1994). What do users describe as positive and negative elements of approachability in a "double coverage" (Quinn, 2001) situation?

As might be expected from the findings of other studies, students described staff conversations unrelated to their question as unhelpful:

> She went back to the rear office and chatted away with the other employees. Actually, they were not all too quiet because I could basically decipher what they were saying. I don't believe that the library has to be a stale environment, but I must admit it did distract me a little from my search . . . When I walked over to the desk once again all three of the employees in the back turned and looked at me. They conversed about who would be the one to tend to me, and eventually one of them approached to find out what I wanted. (Note: branch public library.)

Likewise, users described initiation behavior such as smiling, making eye contact, and finishing other conversations as positive elements:

> There were three librarians working at the desk, two of whom were busy with other patrons. The librarian who helped me was sitting, but he noticed that I was looking to be served and he came over to me immediately. (Note: large public library.)

> Here two librarians, a man and a woman, both middle aged, were sitting face-to-face, talking. As soon as they spotted me they stopped their conversation and turned to face me. Neither of them smiled, but they looked interested in my direction. Something in their eyes gave me the impression that they were willing to help me. I thought that the direct eye contact, the fact that they were squared to me as well as the fact they stopped talking as soon as I approached was much more welcoming than my first encounter. (Note: large public library.)

In addition, some users described situations in which staff members initiated interactions with users not yet acknowledged by their colleagues:

> Standing in line, waiting to ask the reference librarian for help, another one approached asking if help was needed. I found this to be very positive as in most of my experiences in libraries it is usual to have to "wait your turn" rather than have the help come to the user. (Note: main academic library.)

Additional factors, however, contribute to approachability when more than one staff member is involved in acknowledging a user. In each of the following descriptions, one staff member appropriately acknowledged the user, but the user described the encounter negatively:

> After a few seconds a man who was sitting in the adjoining office looked at me but did not come out. A few seconds later a second man came to the desk and asked how he could help. I did not wait long, but the hesitation was long enough that I interpreted that it was not the first person's turn to help, and that he was waiting for the second to take his turn. This made me feel as though I were an unwanted task. (Note: subject or departmental academic library.)

As I approached the reference desk, I observed two women behind it. One seemed occupied with sorting, opening, and piling mail according to types of media. The other woman . . . busied herself at the computer on the desk in front of where she stood. I approached the desk, my question ready and smiled. The woman with the mail looked up and smiled briefly, then returned to her work–obviously I was not her responsibility, I thought. I turned toward the woman at the keyboard and again smiled and waited for her to notice me. Her eyes continued to scan the screen, her fingers jabbing at the keys, for approximately two minutes before she looked up at me and asked, "Can I help you with something?" Her tone implied that I was taking her away from something very important, although a quick survey of the library indicated that I was the only one in there. (Note: branch public library.)

With a single staff member at the desk, appropriate acknowledgment indicates availability and willingness to provide service. When more than one staff member is present, initiation may be more complex: the non-serving staff member may acknowledge the user when the serving staff member does not. Users described this form of acknowledgment as distinctly unhelpful. Staff members who attend to one another's approachability as well as their own could ensure that users feel appropriately acknowledged in double coverage situations.

COLLABORATION

Consultation among staff members has been advocated as a means of improving reference performance for more than 50 years. Margaret Hutchins' 1944 *Introduction to Reference Work* advises the librarian what to do when all individual efforts to answer a reference question have failed:

[S]hould he then give up? No, he should call on other members of the staff for suggestions. Any one of them may have some additional information on the subject which furnishes material on which to base another hypothesis. In some cases another staff member may know just where to lay his hand upon the very thing. (Hutchins, 1944)

RUSA Guideline 5.4 (American Library Association, 1996) encourages staff members to "consult other librarians when additional subject expertise is needed." There has been little mention in the library and information science literature, however, of how such consultation, in which the staff member serving the user consults with a colleague but remains involved in the transaction, might operate in practice. Some students completing the library visit assignment commented positively on consultations:

> [S]he telephoned two other local libraries to see if they might have something to assist my research. She let me behind the counter to talk to one of the librarians she called. He was also very helpful. (Note: subject or departmental academic library.)

> Her next course of action was to look for a librarian who specialized in government documents and who may have a better idea of where to search. She returned with a book listing all consulates in Canada and gave me the contact information for the Japanese consulate in Toronto. She also suggested, on the advice of the other librarian, that I check with Canada Post to ensure that my package can be mailed legally. I found this a very useful suggestion as I otherwise may never have thought of it. (Note: main academic library.)

> When I had wandered away from the reference desk to peruse the books the librarian had given me, I noticed that both she and her colleague were still discussing my question. One of the librarians actually went to the trouble of bringing further reference materials directly to me. This sort of behaviour made me feel that my query was a valid one and that future visits to the public library would be similarly positive experiences. (Note: large public library.)

In fact, one user identified a failure to consult as an unhelpful behavior.

> Behind the circulation desk in the glassed office sat a few women working. The woman at the circulation desk did not make any move to consult her colleagues in that office. I guessed that either she felt she had done her job by referring me to the Main Library or she felt that no one there could have been of assistance. I know that the [local newspaper] publishes the odd article on girls' hockey and that one had been in relatively recently, and in depth, about

girls' hockey in [city]. If any of those women behind her had a daughter playing hockey in [city], they would have seen the article and been able to refer me to newspaper files at least. (Note: branch public library.)

Although students' accounts provided many positive examples of consultation, descriptions also contained two negative themes. First, some students described the consulting staff members as taking over the search from the user:

> The man who was serving me did not smile, and did not say any-thing to me. He went back into the office area. I heard him say "fu-neral homes" to the first man (the one who had seen me first but had not come out). I heard the first say "Arbor" and "Loewen" and spell them for the man who was serving me. He then came out to the desk and showed me the names in a book. (Note: subject or de-partmental academic library.)

In evaluating the experience, this student observed that although the staff member found the answer to the question, "I did, however, feel ex-cluded from the process of my search." Another student used similar language:

> She called over the other librarian again and he told her they didn't have the *Globe and Mail* index on that database. This made me start to doubt her competency . . . The other librarian did suggest I check the *National Post* from last Sunday . . . That wasn't what I was looking for, but for some reason I went along with her when we searched the *National Post* index in the database. I'm not a very assertive person, but I think by this point I had felt that the whole search was out of my hands anyway, that she had somehow taken over. (Note: main academic library.)

In other cases, users described consultations in which they were or felt completely abandoned by staff; one student described being "dumped" after a staff member called on a colleague for consultation:

> This colleague said that . . . he was going to dinner and had to tell the person who was helping me a few things. Without a word to me from either of them they began walking the other way, leaving me alone. I decided to find a computer and try out the URL to see if he would seek me out to offer the promised help; he didn't. After tin-

kering with the database for a little while I decided to leave. I could see the person who had been helping me still at the desk and helping others . . . I found it most upsetting that he dumped me at the end to follow his colleague. If he had said "excuse me I'll be right back with you" or even had sought me out after to make sure I was finding what I needed would have been helpful; leaving me to figure it out on my own was not helpful. (Note: subject or departmental academic library.)

Positive appraisals of collaboration included descriptions of more than one staff member attending to the user's needs and ensuring that she felt involved. Students described collaboration both when the primary staff member consulted with colleagues and when another staff member intervened after overhearing the reference transaction:

The librarian took a few seconds to consider my question. She frowned and looked at the ceiling. Apparently, the other librarian had also been listening to my question because both said, at the same time, "You should try over in the other wing. They deal with sports and stuff like that." (Note: large public library.)

Another librarian who was passing by also verified this with a nod, as I must have looked a little surprised . . . (Note: large public library.)

This "eavesdropping" practice was often described positively.

There were three librarians at this particular desk. One was helping a patron and the other two were talking amongst themselves about something work related I believe. The librarian who was standing up looked at me and waited for my question . . . She went over to the reference shelf behind the desk and picked up a book. The librarian to whom she was previously speaking stood up and suggested another book. I heard her say that this book would be easier to understand. The librarian who was helping me found the appropriate pages in both of the books . . . I agree that the second librarian was right about the books she had suggested being more helpful. It was easier to understand than the other one because it took a less technical slant, but it still provided an adequate overview. (Note: large public library.)

In one case, however, a student commented that an eavesdropper might be communicating a value judgement about the reference question:

> Another staff member who came to stand beside her at the counter looked very nonplussed about the fact that I was asking for lesbian and/or gay materials for children. (Note: large public library.)

Finally, when additional staff members took part in a reference transaction, either as a result of being consulted or of intervening of their own accord, users sometimes described the transaction as a true team effort. One student commented that "I liked that during this time, there was a co-operative atmosphere among librarians and her colleagues kept asking, 'Do you need anything?' There was a definite team atmosphere at the reference desk" (Note: main academic library). Students' descriptions of team reference encounters mentioned the complementary characteristics that each staff member brought to the encounter.

> She began to move towards a second librarian who was positioned at the opposite side of the reference desk. She then asked them to help: "Do you know how we can find a directory or catalogue of companies in Canada who currently perform online publishing services?" The second librarian replied, "I know directories of this kind exist because I've looked for one before." As we spoke, the second librarian walked to a second OPAC terminal behind the reference desk and began doing an OPAC search independent of the first reference librarian and me. In less than two minutes, the second librarian called us over to the terminal on which he was working. Without looking up, he showed us the call number, title, and location of a hard copy directory . . . of Canadian online publishers.

In reflecting on this visit, the student contrasted the two staff members' interaction styles: "The first librarian's communication skills were very good. Her courteous, friendly manner showed a refreshing willingness to help. She showed a clear understanding of my question. This understanding was evident in the Internet search she demonstrated to show me how to answer the question independently as well as her rephrasing of the question to the second librarian." The second staff member

> had anticipated my need for information of this kind and was able to answer my question very efficiently . . . This librarian provided

me a complete answer to my question that was as current as possible . . . However, he was not as friendly as the first librarian was and he communicated less effectively . . . In conclusion, by working together, the two librarians were very helpful. Through her dialogue with me, the first librarian successfully determined exactly the type of information I requested. Through his OPAC search, the second librarian did a good job of finding that information. (Note: main academic library.)

The most complex account of an encounter with multiple reference staff described a student's interaction with eight staff members as she attempted to find out about making armor at a library with a reception desk and two reference desks. The excerpt below is taken from the student's report of what happened when she approached the reception desk with her question.

Librarian #1 looked stunned for a few seconds and stared at me for a full minute before replying . . . "Try over there" (pointing to the reference desk on the left) . . . I walked over to the reference desk and said to Librarian #2, "Hello, I am looking for some information on how to make armour." Librarian #2 smiled and stared at me thoughtfully for a few seconds . . . She looked over at a librarian sitting near her (Librarian #3) and said, "Armour?" (I felt that maybe I had gone to the wrong place.) Librarian #3 gazed at me and asked, "What kind of armour, chain or plate?" (I felt hopeful, perhaps this librarian could help me since she had asked me a question to help me refine my search strategy) . . . Next she said, "Wait, go ask at the other reference desk." (I felt discouraged and confused. I was surprised that my question was so difficult and I was unsure if there was any point in going to the other reference desk.) . . . I walked across the library to the second reference desk and said to Librarian #4, "Hello, I am looking for some information on how to make armour." . . . Another librarian (Librarian #5) came over to help me, having overheard my discussion with Librarian #4 . . . Librarian #4 turned to Librarian #6, who was obviously her supervisor, and asked, "Do you know if we have any books on how to make armour?" . . . Librarian #6 left and simultaneously, another librarian (Librarian #7) entered into the search. She typed into her computer and said to everyone in general, "Maybe I could call Mrs. X at [another library branch]." She phoned. "Oh, she is not in." . . . Librarian #6 came back with a big

book called *The Complete Encyclopedia of Arms and Weapons*. He looked at me and said, "This is a history book but it has some pictures and diagrams that could be useful." . . . Librarian #5, who has been typing at her computer for a while, stopped and looked at me and said, "Here is a website on armour! Hey, it says here to learn from your local armourer." (Everybody laughed.) Librarian #4 then said to me, "You don't have to stand there, go sit (she pointed at a table) and look at the reference book. We'll let you know when we find more." (I felt discouraged and uncertain. I was not sure if I was being dismissed or if they would really continue to help me.) . . . After fifteen minutes had passed, Librarian #7 came to my table and handed me a piece of paper with the words, "Artist Blacksmiths Association of North America" written on it. She did not say anything and walked away rapidly before I had a chance to ask her what I was supposed to do with the information . . . Five minutes later, Librarian #5 came over to my table. She handed me a piece of paper and said, "Here is the website for the SCA [Society for Creative Anachronism, which had been discussed earlier]." . . . After Librarian #5's rapid departure, another librarian (Librarian #8) came over to me. She smiled and said, "Hello, are you the person looking for information on how to make armour? (She handed me a note.) This is, or at least was, the person in the SCA who handles new members. If she isn't, she will still know who to forward you to. If you have any other questions, please call me." (She handed me her business card. I felt positive.) . . . A few minutes later, Librarian #4 came over to my table. She said, "If you would come to the computer over here, I found a website on armour making." . . . (The website was excellent, it had patterns, instructions, and links to other sites. I felt elated. Finally, after a frustrating search, I had the information I was looking for.) Finally, as I was getting ready to leave, Librarian #2 came over to me and said, "I found a book with pictures of armour in it, a costume book. I don't think it's what you wanted (she trailed off) . . ." (I felt surprised that Librarian #2 had remembered my question and that she had come to look for me after sending me to the other reference desk.) I replied, "Thank you but Librarian #4 found a great website for me. I am all set to make armour now!"

In reflecting on this experience, the student wrote "I was particularly impressed by the manner in which all of the librarians worked together as a team. For example, although I had asked Librarian #4 my question,

Librarians #5-#8 immediately became involved to assist her once they realized she was having difficulty." Although this was the only account of such complexity, many of the positive and negative elements included in it (e.g., remembering the question, including the user) are recognizable from general guidelines for reference performance (Dyson, 1992; American Library Association, 1996; Dewdney and Ross, 1994). In transactions involving several staff members, reference staff might consider attending to the ways that they interact with one another in addition to the patron, and might look for ways of systematically drawing on colleagues' complementary strengths.

SERIAL INTERACTIONS

Several writers have noted the effectiveness of monitored referrals, when a staff member sends a user off to another location and invites him or her back for a follow-up in case the referral is unsuccessful (Dewdney and Ross, 1994; RUSA Guidelines 5.2, 5.3, American Library Association, 1996). Student accounts analyzed for this study provided examples of monitored referrals:

> He then wrote down the title of the book and its call number on a small sheet of paper and gave me directions to the reference desk on the second floor. "If they can't help you upstairs just come back down here and we'll have a look in some of the Canadian encyclopedias." (Note: large public library.)

However, students described an additional element of a successful referral, in which the first staff member takes some action to ensure that staff in the referral location are available and able to address the user's question (see RUSA Guidelines 5.6, 5.7, American Library Association, 1996):

> The lady stepped from around the desk. She seemed to be looking at someone. Then she turned back to me and said, "You see that silver pole in the middle of the floor, there is a lady sitting at the desk there. Ask her for what you want." I thanked her and walked towards the pole. Not until I was almost at the pole did I see the person at the desk. As I got close to the desk the librarian raised her head from what she was doing and asked, "May I help you?" (Note: branch public library.)

When I was about to leave her desk she asked me to wait for a moment, so that she could phone somebody upstairs looking after "multilingual collections." She talked to somebody over the phone for a few minutes, and informed me that the library has no books in Bengali in its collection . . . When I approached the information desk upstairs I found two persons working there. I asked one person whether she got a phone call from downstairs a few minutes ago about the multilingual collections. The other person said that she was the one who had the phone conversation, and came forward to answer my questions. (Note: large public library.)

I could see that Carolyn was trying to help me in various possible ways. Carolyn and I returned to the reference desk. She again mentioned that this was a challenging question for her. She wanted to continue her search under CBCA full-text database. Unfortunately at this point she had to leave for a presentation. But before she left she asked Debbie, her colleague, to help me out. Debbie was even more enthusiastic about this search than Carolyn.

In commenting about the experience, this student said: "I would definitely say that this was a very positive library visit experience. What impressed me about this visit was the friendliness and professionalism of those two librarians, and their eagerness to satisfy their patron, the user . . . In working together, both Carolyn and Debbie displayed a spirit of good teamwork" (Note: main academic library).

These consultative referrals, in which the first staff member verifies the availability of other staff members, perform some of the same functions as monitored referrals–they enable the staff member to be relatively certain that the user will successfully continue the reference transaction with another staff member. In addition, the consultative referral may allow the user to avoid having to explain the question and the search process to new staff members, a process that some users described as unhelpful:

I was also disappointed that I had to tell my story several times to different people. While I did have to move from one area of the library to another (from reference to vertical files), this transition could have been better handled by escorting me, and explaining my information request. (Note: large public library.)

Students provided a number of negative examples of the referral, particularly in the context of staff turnover at breaks or at the end of desk shifts:

> There was a lady and a gentleman behind the desk. She was at the front counter adding up a tally sheet so I approached her. I said, "Hi, I was wondering if you could give me a hand finding information on the Landlord and Tenant Act." Her reply was rather unprofessional. She huffed and said, "Well, I'm finished," and then said to the gentleman, "Landlord and Tenant Act." This really made me feel insignificant and that helping me wasn't important to her now that her shift was over. I understand her passing my inquiry on to someone else, however, she could have said something like, "I can't but 'Bob' can. 'Bob,' this young lady is looking for information on the Landlord and Tenant Act." This would have been more professional and still make my question seem important. Her handing me off was helpful because she did not seem like she was interested in helping me, and "Bob" was ready to lend a hand. (Note: main academic library.)

> The librarian then goes and gets a reference book. Another woman approaches her and tells her that she can go on her break. She questions what it is she is working on. They both leave the counter and discuss the contents of some file sitting on a desk. I am starting to get annoyed. While they are having their conference, I overhear three other staff members (who are also behind the counter) gossiping about a colleague who had just left the scene. I find this very unprofessional and proceed to glare at them. The two librarians return to me and Librarian #1 explains my request to Librarian #2 . . . Librarian #1 goes on her break. Librarian #2 goes to look through the reference book *Chase's 1999 Calendar of Events*, but is approached by another librarian (the one who was being gossiped about). They have a personal chat (lasting approximately one minute). I find this very rude. (Note: large public library.)

There are several situations in which a staff member will need to "hand a user off" to a colleague, and both hand-offs and consultative referrals are forms of staff collaboration that deserve more attention. Student descriptions of hand-offs emphasized the helpfulness of explaining to the user what is happening and why, verifying the availability of the second staff member, and/or accompanying the patron to the second staff member (see RUSA Guideline 5.7), and communicating with the second

staff member to explain the question and describe what has been done so far to answer it (see RUSA Guideline 5.6), and the unhelpfulness of using the hand-off as a chance to catch up with a colleague.

CONCLUSION

Users' accounts of reference transactions involving more than one staff member reinforce the appropriateness of many accepted guidelines for reference desk behavior created within the "one user, one staff member" model of the reference transaction. In addition, however, these accounts suggest situations that are not so well reflected in practice guidelines. If the proportion of student accounts mentioning more than one staff member (109 of 237, or 46%) is representative of the number of such transactions in practice, it would be valuable to rethink traditional assumptions about the one user/one staff member model. Gross (1995, 1998, 1999; Gross and Saxton, 2001) has begun to analyze the implications of multiple users in a single reference transaction, and this study introduces some of the characteristics associated with the presence of multiple staff members.

Further research is needed into several aspects of the multi-staff reference transaction. Radford's (1998) work on initiating the reference encounter has provided a beginning for re-evaluating the practice guidelines for approachability, interest, and listening/inquiry when more than one staff member is involved. Other studies of effective reference communication (Baker and Field, 2000; Dewdney and Ross, 1994; Dyson, 1992; Ross and Dewdney, 1994, 1998; Ross and Nilsen, 2000) draw attention to effective elements of staff collaboration in the search process, and effective referrals as part of appropriate follow-up. Students' accounts of their reference transactions with more than one staff member, however, describe a number of elements that require more attention, both from researchers and from professionals.

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