Serving on the reference desk as a web services/user experience librarian

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Abstract: This column discusses the pros and cons of a Web Services/User Experience Librarian serving on a regular reference desk shift, as well as the trend toward the generalist or "renaissance librarian" model.

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I am a new Web Services Librarian with significant technical experience, but no librarianship background. At my academic institution, one of my key duties is covering the reference desk for four hours each work week, with occasional Sunday coverage. While I lack training in librarianship, I do, however, have work experience in technical support, customer service, and teaching undergraduate students. When combined, these experiences provide a strong background for reference desk work. I realized, however, that there is a steep learning curve to becoming a good reference coach who is accustomed to working with all available library resources across a variety of subject areas. Cultivating this versatility, while also training in new reference interview techniques, was a challenging transition to make.

The rationale for my service at the reference desk was a belief that these interactions would improve my skills as Web Services Librarian, a position which requires an understanding of users and their needs. To do this, and to design usability studies, I need first-hand interactions with the users. Yet, direct user interaction occurs not only at the reference desk but also at other public stations in the library; hence, one may argue that web services librarians might be helped by manning all of the other public stations as well on a rotating basis (Kozlowski, 2017). The question is, does reference desk service, or cross-training in other areas of librarianship, really inform the work of web services/user experience librarians?

One goal of a web services/user experience librarian is to create and provide an electronic environment in which the search and discovery process is intuitive and easy to explore. The ultimate goal is for users to be able to find materials without assistance. This differs from the service model of the reference desk, which helps users navigate an information environment that may not always be self-evident or obvious. If the existence of the reference desk signifies an imperfect discovery environment, it may be useful to serve at this desk to learn the pain points. This experience may allow

us to further improve the electronic information environment of the library. For this reason, of the many public-facing posts within the library, experience at the reference desk is particularly useful.

As the types of questions fielded at the reference desk have changed, however, the utility of training for the reference desk becomes less obvious. It can be argued that genuine reference questions are becoming few and far between (Watstein & Bell, 2008, p. 4). As an example, consider my library in the first half of 2017 (January–June). Non-resource/directional questions were dominant at 30% of all reference transactions, followed by computer/printer questions at 28%, and interpretive/informational questions also at 28%. Complex reference question categories occupied only 11% of the total reference transactions. Would it be worth the time and effort, then, for a web services/user experience librarian to work at the reference desk just to experience those scarce reference questions that are relevant to their work? Might it be more efficient to instead interview the reference librarians regularly to learn the pain points?

Another point to consider is that modern librarians, especially academic librarians, are expected to wear multiple hats. I, for example, am also a subject selector and a liaison for an academic department, so doubling as a reference librarian is not entirely unexpected. Goetsch defines this phenomenon as the new renaissance librarian model, in which a single position "brings together the skill sets of a subject librarian, an archivist or records manager, a reference and instruction librarian, and a systems or information technology librarian" (Goetsch, 2008, p. 169). Additional research shows that this renaissance librarian trend is gaining prominence: more technology skills are required in other, traditionally "non-technical" areas of librarianship as well (Gerolimos, Malliari, & Iakovidis, 2015; Riley-Huff & Rholes, 2011; Triumph & Beile, 2015). In this context, a web services/user experience librarian staffing the reference desk is just another part of a larger trend in librarianship.

With the emergence of new technologies, many systems/technology librarians are joining the field, and there are various and competing expectations regarding both new and traditional librarian duties. When MacDonald (2015) interviewed 16 user experience librarians, he found that most (14 out of 16) were also responsible for other "traditional" librarian responsibilities. The generalist trend, or "renaissance librarian" model, means that librarians are expected to be competent in many kinds of traditional librarian duties, while also being skilled in areas of systems and technology. Balancing these potentially competing responsibilities can be difficult, and these librarians might become spread too thin (MacDonald, 2017). They might be spending time and professional development resources to improve their reference skills, for example, which pulls them away from their primary job duties. Eventually, this may prove a barrier to entry into the field and may make it difficult to recruit the best talented specialist. Therefore, it is worth considering whether the well-rounded renaissance librarian model is more important than a dedicated expert in technologies, especially for systems/technology librarians.

As a new Web Services Librarian, I see both strengths and weaknesses in working at the reference desk. Having given this topic considerable thought, I do not have a concrete answer, yet I think the *generalist vs. specialist* argument is worth considering during the early hiring phase, such as when drafting and advertising job descriptions. For job seekers, carefully studying job descriptions would allow new librarians entering the field to know what to expect. I knew my duties would expand beyond web services and usability work, and I am enjoying the process of becoming a renaissance librarian, but everyone's mileage might vary.

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