

Reference 101: Survival Training for Paraprofessionals

Julie White and Mary McAfee

In 1982, the Northwest North Carolina Library Council decided to offer a reference workshop for paraprofessional staff in area libraries who were required to handle reference queries. We enthusiastically agreed to present part of this workshop, since we enjoyed our own reference duties and worked hard to provide excellent service. We had no idea, however, of the tremendous need which existed in North Carolina for training of this kind. After eight years of preparing and conducting these workshops throughout the State, with requests for more sessions each year, we came to realize that there existed an urgent, on-going need for basic, thorough, "this is what it's really like out there" reference training for the large number of paraprofessionals with no library background, who are asked to handle reference questions. What follows is a brief history of the evolution of Mary and Julie's traveling show.

Introduction

There is no doubt that paraprofessionals are doing much of the reference that is being done in public libraries. A 1989 study dealing with the training and use of paraprofessionals for reference work in public libraries found that reference desks are staffed by personnel ranging from librarians with M.L.S. degrees to persons with high school diplomas, no training in reference beyond what was learned on the job, and no help available to them from a professional.¹ Only one-fourth of the libraries studied DO NOT normally use paraprofessionals for reference.²

The average library patron has no idea of the qualifications or background of the person handling his reference transaction. To most of the world, the person sitting behind the reference desk is the librarian, and very often the impression of the library that the patron will take away depends entirely on the success of the reference transaction. There is no allowance given for inaccurate, misunderstood or incomplete answers

to reference questions because the "real" reference librarian was not on duty. If public libraries profess to offer reference service, every patron has the right to expect professional-level service which is consistent and comprehensive regardless of what staff member is assigned to respond to reference inquiries. And, from a public relations standpoint, the public library may get only one chance to prove that its services are a unique and valuable asset to the community. A disappointing experience at the reference desk might convince our public that our services are not worthy of community and financial support.

Some surveys suggest that up to eighty percent of all inquiries received at public library reference desks can be handled by well-trained paraprofessionals.³ However, there is very little in the literature to suggest that public libraries offer any degree of formal training to staff expected to handle these duties. Even in academic libraries, seventy-three percent of institutions report that paraprofessionals learn reference sources "on the job" or by a brief period of observation at the desk.⁴

Paraprofessionals working in libraries requiring them to handle reference inquiries without training are being placed in a highly stressful situation with very little chance to succeed. Consequently, they often face their scheduled time with apprehension and dread and, far from the desired behavior of approaching patrons to initiate contact, they sit hoping that no one will approach the desk to ask a question. When questions are asked, the untrained library worker will often take the shortest route to finishing the transaction, sometimes neglecting the best source because it may be one with which she/he is not familiar.

How Training Helps

The benefits of training in the area of reference for paraprofessionals extend beyond the obvious gain in knowledge of reference materials and methods of interviewing and searching. Professional librarians take for granted our many opportunities to interact and "talk shop" with our peers. Paraprofessionals are rarely given the

Julie White is Assistant Director of the Athens Regional Library in Athens, Georgia. Mary McAfee is Assistant Director of the Extension Division of the Forsyth County Public Library in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

chance to talk with others who work in similar settings with many of the same problems, frustrations and doubts. A great deal of comfort is derived from the knowledge that patrons and reference problems are the same everywhere. We are all frustrated by poorly planned school assignments, often brought to us by the parents instead of the students; by lonely individuals who call reference for companionship; and by the countless eccentric individuals and overwhelming requests that, we are amazed to realize, are not unique to our library. It does help to feel that we are all in this together.

Attending library workshops provides a morale boost for most participants. A change in scenery is usually welcome, and the fact that the library recognizes the importance of its paraprofessionals by investing both time and money in their training contributes to a feeling of being valued by one's employer. With turnover among library paraprofessionals three times as great as among librarians,⁵ it would be to the benefit of libraries to acknowledge the vital roles these employees play in an effort to keep a consistent staff. Discussions of library policies and procedures, problem patrons, and solutions to common dilemmas serve to make these staff members feel more a part of their own institutions.

By far the greatest benefit derived from reference training is the confidence instilled in each individual. The library is able to offer better reference service when paraprofessional employees have more knowledge of sources and search procedures as well as the self-assurance to approach patrons needing assistance. The employee does a better job and at the same time enjoys it more.

The Workshop

In planning the workshop, our first order of business was to decide what we would cover and how we would go about covering it. Based on our own library school reference courses and our on-the-job experience, we came up with what we thought was most important to know before facing the public at the reference desk. We developed a course outline which included sources, the reference interview, reference situations, and activities related to all of these. The division of duties came about naturally as a result of our backgrounds and special interests.

The workshop has never been presented the same way twice. It has evolved over time as we attempted to respond to suggestions and requests from participants. We always want our presentation to meet specific needs as nearly as possible. Some elements, however, are included in each

workshop. Our source list, updated frequently to include the most current and relevant materials, is always the backbone of the course. We constantly worry that participants will perish of boredom as we describe page after page of reference books, but we are always surprised and pleased to learn that this is a favorite aspect of the course for many. We mention every source on the list, describing the scope, arrangement, special features, recency, and common uses. Some titles are self-explanatory; others, such as business and legal sources, offer a more formidable challenge and take quite a bit of time to discuss and explain.

Paraprofessionals working in libraries requiring them to handle reference inquiries without training are being placed in a highly stressful situation with very little chance to succeed.

Because each library represented at the workshop owns a variety of reference tools which we are not able to cover, we include tips on how to look at a source, enabling participants to return to their libraries and evaluate materials in their collections. We also discuss non-book sources — such as hard-to-find files, annual report collections, resource people, and other libraries — which play a vital role in the provision of reference service, especially in libraries where funds for materials are limited. We share ideas for search strategies designed to locate answers in the most efficient and comprehensive way.

Some participants seem less than thrilled upon learning that our course usually includes some form of "homework." The assignments that we distribute are designed to ensure that each participant has the opportunity to work with most of the sources on our list. Depending on the workshop schedule, homework is handled in different ways. When the two-day workshop is held on successive Fridays, students take questions home to their own libraries and search for answers there. On two consecutive days, workshop time is allocated for students to use the resources of the host library. We designed different sets of questions for different purposes. Again, we have been surprised over the years to find that many participants select homework as their favorite aspect of the training.

Another well-received element of the training involves small group discussions of common situations faced in reference service. We developed a list of such situations drawn from our own experiences to facilitate discussion and sharing among our participants. In encouraging discussions of common frustrations and policy questions, we hope that our students begin to feel a collegial relationship with their peers in other libraries and realize that they are not alone in experiencing doubts and difficulties. We are frequently asked for the "right" answers to these situational dilemmas. While there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, we often share our own philosophies of service, as well as various policies we have heard about, in order to demonstrate the service attitudes we hope to promote. We hasten to add that many factors determine the optimum handling of any given situation, and each case calls for some degree of judgment on the part of the library staff, as well as interpretation of existing library policies.

The final, and in some ways most important, aspect of the training is our discussion of the reference interview. Our material for this topic is a combination of training we received based on the state of Maryland's reference procedures, professional literature on the subject, and our combined years of experience. Numerous studies point to the importance of the reference interview in determining the success of the entire reference transaction; therefore we spend a significant amount of time teaching and coaching effective techniques to improve communications between the staff member and the patron. We demonstrate several examples of techniques designed to draw information from the patron, and often our students volunteer to role-play for the other participants.

Looking back, we realize that each of our workshops has had a distinctive personality, and our sessions have taken a variety of directions. We have tried to remain flexible enough to be able to change directions in midstream if it seemed to be necessary. Every group has responded a little differently, and we have tried to tailor our presentation to fit each group's particular needs. Because we are reference practitioners in our everyday lives, we believe that we have been able to relate to the participants in a way that makes it easier to encourage a free exchange of ideas. Because we all had experienced some of the very same situations, we shared a basic level of understanding.

We really do believe that the benefits of these workshops have been felt by many libraries in

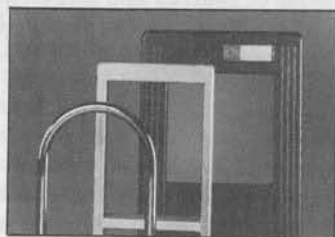
North Carolina. Paraprofessionals assigned to provide reference service in these libraries have a better awareness of reference sources — both those in their own collections and those in other libraries. They are better able to use the books, and know where to look for answers. There is a little more confidence now — a willingness to field whatever comes along, with no excuses. We have tried to instill the value of reference service and a sense of pride in libraries. We came together to examine and demystify the intriguing, sometimes aggravating, and ever-changing world of reference librarianship and, in the process, we gained a great deal. We have established professional friendships all over the state. We have laughed a lot. We have learned even more.

References

1. Elizabeth Futas, "Current Issues in Reference and Adult Services," *Reference Quarterly* (Spring 1990): 328-31.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Martin P. Courtois and Lori A. Goetsch, "Use of Nonprofessionals at Reference Desks," *College and Research Libraries* 45 (September 1984): 385-91.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Herbert S. White, *Managing the Special Library: Strategies for Success Within the Larger Organization* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).

21

Tired of making "permanent loans?"



 **Checkpoint®**

Tomorrow's Technology for Today's Libraries™

550 Grove Road • P.O. Box 188 • Thorofare, New Jersey 08086
(800) 257-5540 • TELEX: 84-5396 • FAX (609) 848-0937

Wes Brewer, Sales Representative
2921 Welcome Drive
Durham, North Carolina 27705
(919) 493-2161