

Unobtrusive Evaluation for Improvement: The CCPL&IC Experience

Patsy J. Hansel

In the fall of 1985, the Cumberland County Public Library & Information Center administered an unobtrusive study of reference services (i.e., staff did not know the questions were part of a test) in the library to determine the rate of accuracy of library responses to factual questions. The purpose of the study was to use this information to spot areas in which library service could be improved and to develop strategies for improvement.

Background

There is a growing body of literature relating to unobtrusive evaluation of reference services in libraries, starting with Terence Crowley's pioneering work in the late sixties¹ through his recent article summarizing the research to 1985.² Crowley's work indicated and recent studies have confirmed³ that library patrons do not have a very good chance of having their questions answered correctly at a library reference desk. In most libraries studied, the odds are close to fifty-fifty.⁴

As a group, library professionals tend to be aware of these studies but not, it seems, to take them very seriously. When the "fifty-five per cent rule" is mentioned, librarians often express amazement and insist, "maybe—but not in *my* library." However, there is virtually nothing in the literature to indicate that practicing librarians have done studies of their own individual libraries to try to prove the researchers wrong.⁵ Alvin M. Schrader has stated the issue in this way: "The problem of the lack of commitment to reference service excellence will neither go away nor be resolved by the kind of passive approach which has so far characterized our efforts. Researchers, educators, and practitioners must, first and foremost, acknowledge the existence of problems with respect to reference service accuracy. This acknowledgment has not yet occurred on a wide scale. Until it does, until our community is prepared to take seriously the call for reference ser-

vice accuracy, unobtrusive performance measurement will remain as the next frontier for library and information services. As of now, we are still in the age of misinformation."⁶

At CCPL&IC, we think we know why so few are willing to brave that new frontier. It is like all frontiers—it is difficult and it is frightening. Those of us who work reference desks are not used to having anyone look over our shoulders when we are working with a patron. This is viewed as a very personal transaction, an "art" rather than a science, and not something that anyone not involved could presume to evaluate or judge. Yet we all also know that there are times when we do not perform at our best and we have been known to take comfort in the knowledge that no one is aware of our deficiency except ourselves and the anonymous patron who is receiving less than good service. Perhaps it was that nagging knowledge that convinced us at CCPL&IC that unobtrusive measurement was the method we had to use to attempt to get an accurate picture of our reference service.

We could have done a patron survey of reference service. We have done general patron satisfaction surveys and, as in most such library studies, they have been positive.⁷ Every quarter we sample reference transaction statistics as a quantitative measure of our reference service. We could have decided to record additional documentation on these questions and then evaluate how well they were handled based on that information. In our heart of hearts, though, we knew these would all be evasions of the central issue: what type of service can that anonymous user expect to get when no one else is watching?

We knew the risks involved. We knew the accuracy rate could be as bad or worse than those of other unobtrusive studies, and that perhaps the library's reputation could suffer with our board or even the public if the media got hold of it. At the time, we felt that our reference service had an excellent reputation in the community. When the possibility of such a study was mentioned to some of our trustees who are also library users, they questioned its necessity. They had no doubt that the library's reference service

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was beyond reproach. There was certainly a temptation to avoid anything that might possibly besmirch that reputation.

However, the logic of an unobtrusive study of our reference services as the best method of evaluation seemed irrefutable, so we decided to take the plunge.

Purpose

The purpose of the CCPL&IC study differs from most other studies primarily in that it was done by library practitioners, not researchers, with the ultimate goal of evaluation and improvement of library service in one particular library.

Most other studies have evaluated reference service at reference desks at main library outlets. Since we were interested in reference service throughout our library system, we did not limit our sample to the main library or to professional reference staff. All locations were included, from our smallest branch which is open thirty hours a week and has one nonprofessional staff member to headquarters, which at the time of the study was split among three buildings and had four professionals devoted to reference service. (The way our former headquarters operated is hard to describe. You had to work in it, or try to use it, to appreciate it: the adult reference and nonfiction

and periodical collections were in one building; audiovisuals, adult fiction and children's services were in another building a block and a half away; several blocks on, but not in a straight line, was the building that housed the North Carolina Foreign Language Center, an LSCA-funded project located in our library system.) Several other professionals from other headquarters departments helped out at the headquarters reference desk at some periods during the week and on weekends. At the time of the study there were no professionals (those with MLS's) in the branches except for administrative staff who did some subbing in the branches.

There are those who would argue (at least several of them have done so with me when I described this study to them) that "reference" service does not occur in branch libraries with no professional staff. My standard response is that professional librarians may not define what goes on in such branches as reference service, but to many of our patrons, their branch is their library, and if they don't get reference service there, they are not going to get it from any library. Also, based on CCPL&IC's 1985 output measures survey, 20% of the reported reference transactions took place at headquarters and 80% in the branches. Reference transactions *are* occurring in our grossly

Reference Service Evaluation Survey

1. Date _____ Day of week _____ Time _____
2. Circle location: Stein Anderson Bordeaux East Fay
Eutaw Hope Mills Spring Lake Stedman
3. If possible, staff member's name: _____
4. Question was asked: In-person _____ By telephone _____
 - a. For questions asked by telephone:
 1. Did you understand the staff member who answered the phone (i.e. did they speak distinctly)? Yes _____ No _____
 2. Were you transferred to another person? Yes _____ No _____
If Yes, were you notified that this was happening?
Yes _____ No _____
 3. What number did you dial? _____
5. What question did you ask? _____
6. Did the librarian paraphrase the question, or request additional information to be sure that the question was understood? Yes _____ No _____
7. What answer did you get to your question? _____
8. Did the librarian provide the source of information? Yes _____ No _____
 - a. If Yes, record the source here: _____
 - b. If No, ask once for the source and record it here: _____
9. If the librarian did not answer your question immediately, did he or she offer:
 - a. To work on it further and get back to you? _____
 - b. To consult with other staff members? _____
 - c. To refer the question to another library or agency? _____
10. If the librarian offers any of the above, accept the offer and record any results on the back of this form.
11. Did the librarian ask if your question was answered? Or if the response was sufficient? Yes _____ No _____
12. Approximately how much time lapsed between asking the question and getting an answer? 1-10 min 10-30 min
30-60 min Within 24 hours More than 24 hours
13. If this was a real information need of yours, would you have been satisfied with library's response? Yes _____ No _____
14. Based on this experience, would you recommend to others that they use the library to get information? Yes _____ No _____
15. What is your subjective impression of the librarian's:

Friendliness: Poor _____ Fair _____ Good _____

Competence: Poor _____ Fair _____ Good _____
16. If you have additional comments about this interaction, please make them on the back of this form.

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understaffed branches. We wanted to gauge the accuracy of those transactions, and whether patrons could be expected to be referred downtown when the situation required it.

We had a number of questions that we wanted this survey to help answer. What sort of service could a patron asking a question at any service point expect to receive? Were branch personnel answering accurately questions that could be answered from the sources in their branches? Were patrons being referred to headquarters only when necessary, and when referred, were they referred to the correct department? At headquarters, if the patron called or visited the wrong service point, was he redirected to the correct one without a lot of runaround? Did the patron receive the correct answer to the question asked? In our estimation, did the patron receive good service? In the patron's estimation, did the patron receive good service?

However, our purpose was not just to gather this data and analyze it. We wanted to proceed to the next logical step—to use the information to improve the information service provided in this particular library system.

As Charles McClure has said, "The primary factor that currently limits the quality of reference services is an attitude of complacency—one which assumes that (1) the vast majority of answers given to questions are accurate and timely, (2) the reference services currently provided are, in fact, accomplishing service objectives and resolving the information needs of the library's clientele, and (3) existing reference staff competencies and skills are 'adequate' and are not likely to need improvement. These attitudes are based on assumptions which can be best tested by the use of unobtrusive evaluation techniques. Once they have been tested, specific strategies can be taken to improve existing levels of services and staff skills."⁸ We decided that we didn't want to be complacent any longer, and that we were ready to implement strategies to make improvements where we found our services wanting.

Methodology

Joanne O'Donnell, CCPL&IC's head of information services, designed and coordinated the study, which paralleled the 1982-83 study of Illinois libraries by the University of Illinois Library Research Center.

Joanne solicited volunteers from the Friends of the Library and the library board of trustees (a gutsy move, you must admit). We believe that one of the strengths of the study was that we used

actual library users of this system as our "proxies" for everyday patrons. Joanne's goal was to have enough volunteers to have 25 questions asked at each library location. She concluded the study with 162 usable responses, ranging from 28 at headquarters locations to 13 at our smallest branch.

Joanne planned hour-long training sessions for the volunteers. Three volunteers attended one of the sessions and were also given written instructions. The other six used only the written instructions. The volunteers were given a list of questions to choose from, and were also encouraged to ask questions of their own devising, which several did. The list of questions was a subset of the questions used for the 1982-83 Illinois study, with some additional questions tailored for our community (what are the hours of the Biltmore House, for example).

The questionnaire that we used (Illustration 1) was also the Illinois form tailored for our particular needs. Asking for the staff member's name (question 3) was necessary to meet our purpose of evaluation for improvement. If we found that certain staff members gave less than satisfactory service, we wanted to be able to share that information with them for developmental purposes.

We added question 11 after reading a draft of the Maryland study (later reported in *Library Journal*⁹) which stressed the importance of asking the patron at the end of the transaction if he had gotten the information that he needed.

There are those who have expressed their concern about the ethics of judging accuracy of reference responses with the staff involved not knowing that it is going on. We decided to deal with this by announcing in early summer that such a test would occur at some point in the future, without giving any more specific information. The study occurred between October 20 and November 2, 1985.

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their branch is their library,
and if they don't get reference
service there, they are not
going to get it from any library.**

After the volunteers had completed their forms, the forms were turned in to Joanne for evaluation. She and I then analyzed all of the forms to determine the "correctness" of the answers provided.

Results

The first thing we learned is that determining whether a question to which there is a factual answer is answered factually is not always as easy as it would seem. There are degrees of accuracy, and judging accuracy for some of the questions was so questionable that we threw them out.

Of the 162 usable responses, 121 or 74.7% were correct based on our measure of correctness: the patron received the correct response immediately, or the patron was referred to the best source (usually within the system)¹⁰ to get the answer. Another 10.5% were not "wrong"—staff offered to look further, but the patron did not accept the offer; the patron was asked to call back; or the patron was referred when the answer could have been made available more expeditiously. So, we could increase our score by saying that 85.2% were "not wrong." However, the extra 10.5% did not meet our standards of the best library service (Illustration 2).

Absolutely incorrect responses totalled 24, or 14.8%. In five of these instances, staff failed to find the answer immediately and did not offer to search further or offer other alternatives to the patron; the remaining 19 were answered, but the answers were not correct. Incorrect answers included the following:

1. In answering a question about whether bluebirds migrate or not, the staff person found the correct answer and read it to the patron over the phone, but then went further and misinterpreted it for the patron.

2. Twice when the 1984 Newbery Award winner was requested, the same staff person gave the title *Dear Mrs.* (instead of the correct *Mr. Henshaw*).

3. When asked for Dr. Seuss's real name, two staff members in different locations failed to mention that his first name is Theodor, not Theodore.

4. When asked if a gift is required at a christening, one staff person answered no, and cited *World Book* as the source. We still haven't found anything in *World Book* about etiquette in relation to christenings.

5. When asked for a North Carolina author who had written two books in the past year, the staff person suggested Clyde Edgerton. When informed by the patron that this was incorrect, the staff person referred the patron to headquarters.

6. When asked for the population of Cumberland County, a staff person gave a dated figure.

7. A patron asked for a book that the library owned and was told by a staff person that the library did not own it. (Proxies had been

requested not to simply ask for a book title, but this one did anyway.)

8. When the meaning of "Tweedledum and Tweedledee" was asked on two different occasions at two different locations, patrons received incomplete information. One resulted from staff answering "off the top of their heads."

9. When asked a specific question about Uri Geller, a patron was given an address to write to when there was information available in the library.

10. In searching for the title of a poem, the staff person misspelled one of the words in the title and told the patron he could not locate the poem when the library did have it.

11. One staff person provided a general address and telephone number for the Museum of Natural History when a complete mailing address was requested.

12. When asked what to do to prevent a race track from coming to the area, the staff person gave a lot of advice but, as the proxy put it, "did not offer any reference work or referral."

13. When asked if Texarkana is in Texas or Arkansas, one staff person gave the answer "Texas," which is half right.

14. One staff person gave the wrong date for when the United States first collected income tax.

15. One staff person was asked President Reagan's major in college and replied that *World Book* listed it as economics, whereas it is actually listed as economics and sociology.

16. In one case, a patron called at closing time and was asked to call back the next day. Since the person taking the call could have handled it immediately instead of asking the patron to wait until the next day, we decided to count this as incorrect.

There are those on the staff who maintain that we "graded hard." While I don't think we were particularly hard, I don't think we were "easy" either. Joanne as head of information services and I as assistant director have a perception of what good library service is for this library system, and it was that on which we based any judgment calls when pure accuracy was not easy to establish.

Analysis

Our raw score of 74.7% correct responses was better than those in most other studies of this type reported in the literature. This was gratifying to a point. In exhorting staff to do better in the future, we have been able to stress that we are already doing a pretty good job when compared to other studies. Positive reinforcement, as we all

| Location | Total Responses | Correct Responses | Correct Referrals | % Correct | Transactions Incomplete=Incorrect Staff offer of follow-through Patron asked to call back not accepted by patron | | % | Inadequate Responses Unnecessary or incorrect referral No offer of follow-through | | % | Incorrect Responses | % |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|--|---|----|---|---|----|---------------------|----|
| HQ1 | 22 | 9 | 7 | 72.7 | 1 | 2 | 13 | 2 | 1 | 13 | — | — |
| HQ2 | 28 | 21 | — | 75.0 | 1 | 1 | 7 | — | 1 | 3 | 5 | 17 |
| BR1 | 26 | 13 | 3 | 61.5 | 1 | — | 3 | 3 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 19 |
| BR2 | 22 | 15 | 2 | 77.3 | — | — | — | 2 | — | — | 3 | 13 |
| BR3 | 17 | 7 | 5 | 70.6 | 1 | — | 5 | — | 1 | 5 | 3 | 17 |
| BR4 | 15 | 12 | — | 80.0 | — | — | — | — | 2 | 13 | 1 | 6 |
| BR5 | 19 | 13 | 2 | 78.9 | 1 | — | 5 | 1 | — | 5 | 2 | 10 |
| BR6 | 13 | 8 | 4 | 92.3 | — | — | — | 1 | — | 7 | — | — |
| System | 162 | 98 | 23 | 74.7 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 8 | 19 | 11 |

ILLUSTRATION 2

know, works better than negative. But it's hard to get too excited about knowing that 25% of our patrons may not be getting the quality of service that we want them to get.

In comparing performance among our locations, we were interested to learn that, based on this study, our patrons are apt to receive more accurate reference service in four of our six branches than at the headquarters locations, which have the concentration of professional staff and reference materials (see Illustration 2—the branches are arranged in descending order based on their annual book circulation). This is true both for initially correct responses and correct responses when added to correct referrals. Headquarters' incorrect answers were equal to those of the worst branch. This gives a general indication that our branches may be better accomplishing their function than headquarters is, or was when this survey was done. We have some pretty good rationalizations for that. At the time of the study, CCPL&IC's "headquarters" was geographically dispersed in probably the worst headquarters facilities in the state. Since then, a new headquarters has been completed, large enough to bring all headquarters services under the same roof for the first time in twenty years. That should take care of some of the inefficiencies inherent in the old arrangement.

The branches also show a range of proficiency. The largest branch in terms of staff and circulation had the worst percentage correct (61.5). The smallest branch did the best (92.3). We could suppose that the largest branch is not as likely to be accurate *because* it is so busy; however, at the time of the study, BR2 was busier *per staff* than BR1 and also had a better percentage of correct responses (77.3).

In accord with other studies of patron satisfaction, our proxy patrons rate the library better than the service they received might seem to warrant (Illustration 3). Although they received correct responses an average of only 74.7% of the time, they were satisfied with the response 90.1% of the time, and in 96.6% of the cases they would recommend the library to others. Some of their comments were illustrative of their feelings about this inconsistency: "one problem would not discourage me," "not discouraged—young lady was polite and sincere." In a couple of instances, our proxy patrons said they would not recommend the branch they called, but would recommend calling reference at headquarters directly.

Conclusions

Reference service at CCPL&IC may be better than in a number of other public libraries as indi-

cated by various unobtrusive studies of reference service; but it still has room for improvement.

In a very thought-provoking article in the December 1980 *American Libraries*, Herb White suggests something disturbing. Perhaps library patrons responding to user studies "merely state an expectation for what they have gotten in the past and for what they think is reasonable to expect in the future. In short, we have taught them to play the game by our own rules. They accept five-week delays in interlibrary loan as reasonable because we have told them to."¹¹ I hope that we are not doing the same thing to ourselves as library managers. We should not believe that just because most of the studies rate reference accuracy around 50% that something closer to 75% is laudable. One-quarter of our patrons may still be short-changed.

The performance of our branch staffs was particularly gratifying. We have emphasized staff training particularly for nonprofessionals over the past several years, and we believe this study indicates that we are getting results.

Follow-up

After the study was completed, Joanne made an announcement of the results at a general staff meeting, pointing out areas that needed improvement while also emphasizing how good our score was in comparison to those in similar studies. Staff were also alerted that we plan to do a sim-

ilar survey at least annually, with no further warnings.

After the study, Joanne shared the individual inquiry forms with supervisors at all locations so that they could share the results with their own staffs and know directly the areas in which they did well and areas needing improvement. Head of Extension Services Marsha Grove introduced the results of the study to the branch heads by giving them a pop quiz, self-graded, on where to look for some of the things that were missed in the study. Then she passed on the answers and the forms.

Our follow-up also involved discussing specific problems with staff members who were responsible for more than one inaccurate response in the survey, or who seemed to have special weaknesses as indicated by the study. There are those who strongly recommend against using unobtrusive studies in this way.¹² However, our whole performance appraisal system is based on sharing information with staff directly, not indirectly through a general discussion with all staff in a department, as has been suggested. It is only through individuals that improvement in service will come. Administrative commitment to excellence in library service is meaningless without the commitment of individual staff.

Since the study, reference staff have begun offering monthly mini-workshops on different areas of reference service. These workshops are open to all staff. We have also had one two-day

Results of Unobtrusive Study of Reference Accuracy — CCPL&IC — 10/85

| Location | Total Responses | Correct Responses | Correct Referrals | % Correct | Friendliness "good" | Competence "good" | Patron Satisfied | Patron would recommend |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| HQ1 | 22 | 9 | 7 | 72.7 | 81.0 | 90.5 | 95.0 | 95.0 |
| HQ2 | 28 | 21 | | 75.0 | 96.2 | 96.2 | 88.9 | 100.0 |
| BR1 | 26 | 13 | 3 | 61.5 | 100.0 | 70.8 | 83.3 | 87.0 |
| BR2 | 22 | 15 | 2 | 77.3 | 90.9 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| BR3 | 17 | 7 | 5 | 70.6 | 82.4 | 88.2 | 82.4 | 100.0 |
| BR4 | 15 | 12 | | 80.0 | 85.7 | 100.0 | 92.9 | 100.0 |
| BR5 | 19 | 13 | 2 | 78.0 | 100.0 | 87.5 | 87.5 | 100.0 |
| BR6 | 13 | 8 | 4 | 92.3 | 100.0 | 84.6 | 91.7 | 91.7 |
| SYSTEM | 162 | 98 | 23 | 74.7 | 92.2 | 89.4 | 90.1 | 96.6 |

basic reference workshop aimed primarily at non-professionals. A committee with representatives from branches and headquarters has begun meeting to discuss reference topics of importance to the system and to plan future training.

We believe our relatively high percentage of correct responses to reference questions as measured unobtrusively by this study reflects the staff's commitment to quality service. We will continue to offer training opportunities so that staff can continue to develop their knowledge and expertise. We will continue the unobtrusive studies on an annual basis to measure this systemwide commitment to excellence, and to use the results to continue developing strategies for improvement.

References

1. Terence Crowley and Thomas Childers, *Information Service in Public Libraries: Two Studies*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1971.
2. Terence Crowley, "Half-Right Reference—Is It True?," *RQ*, Fall 1985: 59-68.
3. Peter Hernon and Charles R. McClure, "Unobtrusive Reference Testing: The 55 Percent Rule," *Library Journal*, 15 April 1986: 37-41.
4. Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward, "Improving Reference

Performance: Results of a Statewide Study," *Library Journal*, 1 November 1985: 32-35.

4. Crowley's article in the Fall *RQ* directs you to these studies.
5. Illinois evaluates public library reference service statewide on an annual basis. Library Research Center, University of Illinois, *Illinois Library Statistical Report*. Springfield, IL: Illinois State Library, 1983-.
6. Alvin M. Schrader, "Performance Standards for Accuracy in Reference and Information Services: The Impact of Unobtrusive Measurement Methodology," in *Evaluation of Reference Services* edited by Bill Katz and Ruth A. Fraley, 210. New York: The Haworth Press, 1984.
7. To develop a healthy distrust for patron satisfaction surveys, see George D'Elia and Sandra Wall, "User Satisfaction with Library Service—A Measure of Public Library Performance?," *The Library Quarterly*, April 1983: 109-133.
8. Charles R. McClure, "Output Measures, Unobtrusive Testing, and Assessing the Quality of Reference Services," in Katz and Fraley, 225.
9. See Gers and Seward and also the letter to the editor in response to this article by Thomas Childers in *Library Journal*, 15 April 1986: 10.
10. We are aware that some guidelines that libraries use, including the output measures for public libraries, recommend counting referrals as incomplete transactions. However, a significant part of library service at CCPL&IC is ACCESS, our information and referral service, and we feel quite capable of judging when a referral outside the system is the correct answer.
11. Herb White, "Library Effectiveness—The Elusive Target," *American Libraries*, December 1980: 682.
12. McClure, 224-225.

Honorary and Life Memberships Nominations

The North Carolina Library Association, through its Honorary and Life Membership Committee, is seeking suggestions for nominees for Honorary and Life memberships.

It has been the custom of NCLA to make these two awards based on the following criteria:

1. Honorary memberships may be given to non-librarians who have rendered important services to the library interests of the state.
2. Honorary memberships for non-librarians should be given at a time considered appropriate in relation to the contribution made.
3. Life memberships may be given to librarians who have served as members of the North Carolina Library Association and who have made noteworthy contributions to librarianship in the state. These memberships are limited to librarians who have retired.

Recommendations for nominations should be accompanied by biographical information, including contributions to librarianship.

Recommendations for nominations should be submitted to: Dr. Mell Busbin, Committee Chair, NCLA Honorary and Life Membership Committee, P.O. Box 411, Boone, N.C. 28607, no later than January 31, 1987.

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