
All I Really Needed to Know I Didn't Learn in Library School

Lois Walker

Having just completed eight months as a professional librarian, I have acquired knowledge and attitudes I did not possess when I graduated from library school. Conversations with other beginning reference librarians have shown me I am not alone in my experience as a new librarian. With this in mind, I thought it might be helpful for those still pre-employed or those on the verge of graduation to be aware of what awaits them.

Two weeks after I began my job, I was assigned my first reference desk hours. Although I had taken basic and advanced reference courses, I still felt inadequate. I was comforted by the fact there was another librarian on the desk with me. She and I would consult on difficult questions. If I drew a complete blank on a query, I would refer the question to my more experienced colleague.

It doesn't work that way.

I quickly discovered that reference skills are primarily learned on the hoof. At the times I was most desperate for assistance, the other reference librarian was either a) off helping someone else, b) working on her collection management duties, or c) watching to see how I handled the question.

Much of the time, though, there was no one else to turn to. I work in a smaller library and was often on the desk by myself. It was then I was confronted with the truly thorny matters. How do you change the ribbon on the printer? Where are the ribbons kept? These sort of problems generally come up five minutes before closing and the student has to have the printout tonight. You will find yourself going through cabinets and desk drawers, having both the opportunity and the embarrassment of finding many personal items along the way to the ribbons.

Once you are able to answer a few questions correctly and to change a ribbon, you will be faced with other problems. Of particular interest is the situation in which a patron tries to make you his personal librarian. The patron reads the name tag you wear so briskly and efficiently, and each time he calls or comes to the desk thereafter, he asks for you by name. He leaves messages for you to

return his calls, and he refuses to deal with other librarians. Since he is unaware what hours you are assigned to the reference desk, he will call anytime to ask you to look up something for him. You cast back in your mind to classroom solutions to the "problem patron" and discover the "Adopt-a-Librarian" situation was never discussed.

Another situation that arises is "new place disorientation." I have been asked simple questions, but cannot call to mind the name of the reference book that holds the answer. I could go right to it at the library in my library school, but here the shelves are laid out at different angles. The light diffracts differently through these windows. Small, subtle changes, but confusing nonetheless. You don't have a "feel" for the place yet.

At a conference I attended recently, Will Manley began his presentation by asking how many of those present worked in libraries that were overstaffed. The question was met with laughter. He then inquired how many librarians didn't have enough to do. More laughter. The point is well taken. As a professional librarian, you will never have enough time. While you are trying desperately to compile statistics that were due last week and are racing from the copy machine to your office, a patron will stop you with a "quick question." You will soon learn the label "quick" applies to the amount of time it takes to ask the question. It will take a mere fifteen seconds to ask. Answering may require half an hour.

You will also be challenged by questions that you could probably answer if you only understood them. The "what is she saying?" dilemma can be painful. You want to help the patron, and she is very eager to convey her request, but language is a barrier. This is one instance when you can fall back on reference class knowledge. You recall being told to ask a foreign student to write down the question. You ask. She writes. Then you can't read her writing.

Another language barrier that exists between you and the patron is library jargon. In your papers and speeches at library school, words such as "citation" and "online catalog" won praise. When you use those same phrases with students, you may find yourself looking at a blank face.

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Patrons will seldom use the terminology you have become so comfortable with, and they won't understand you when you use it. You suggest the patron use "CD-ROM." He asks, "What are 'seedy roms'?" You ask another patron if she has tried ERIC, and she asks who he is.

The phone. You accept the job believing your library will have a policy regarding telephone reference. After all, you know from your library classes that all libraries have written and specific policies about everything. When you ask about policies, however, you will be handed some yellow pages and a cheerful admonition that they are out of date and not to pay too much attention to them. The policy is in the process of being revised. Policy, you will learn, is always in the process of being revised.

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Another new facet for most of you is that you will be supervising. Most librarians have a Library Technical Assistant or students reporting to them. Library management courses discuss such worthy matters as orbital management, but do not address how to deal with student workers who hide in the stacks and eat candy or what to say to the student who calls in to say she cannot come to work because it is raining.

You will also be subjected to committees. There will be campus-wide committees including the academic study committee, the undergraduate education committee, and the committee to oversee the committees. Just when you think you are going to have an afternoon free to catch up, you will look at your calendar and discover you are supposed to be in a meeting at that very moment.

Not all committees will be academic or esoteric. You may be selected for the library gift committee. You foolishly think this the least important of your committees. If, however, you fail to buy one shower gift, you will learn otherwise. The colleague who just had the new baby and did not receive a gift will never again cover your desk hours or bring you homemade brownies.

Part and parcel of this lack of time is the need to be flexible. You will quickly discover that almost any task you begin will be interrupted. You will not be able to divide your time into neat little segments the way you could in library school. Then, you could sit down in your dorm room or at the library and devote as much time as you needed or wanted to your Academic Freedom class. Your time was your own. It won't be any-

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more. Your neat desk will dissolve in clutter, and every time you turn your back someone will throw a stack of papers on top. Five months from now, you will uncover three "Rush" memos.

Finally, you will be doing a certain amount of grub work. You will be moving tables, setting up exhibits, and, yes, even picking up trash in the library. You may also become involved in some interesting projects. How many have ever had the opportunity to collect dead roaches for the preservation librarian's display?

All this lies ahead. The only thing you have to refer back to is a couple of reference courses, a bit of online searching, and some collection development. Once you begin work in a library, you will truly discover that all you really needed to know they didn't teach you in library school.

