From Past-Present to Future-Perfect: A Tribute to Charles A. Bunge and the Challenges of Contemporary Reference Service

Chris D. Ferguson
Guest Editor

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Reference librarian roles are evolving in today’s rapidly changing environment. Values that have shaped and guided our profession thus far are discussed, and the
rigors of working at a general reference desk are portrayed. Information overload, the demands of the information age, general societal trends, and new technologies are credited with shaping service directions. Strategies for maintaining professional competence and currency are presented, and emerging roles are profiled.

Peer Reflection: Collegial Coaching and Reference Effectiveness

Nancy Huling

Greater attention needs to be paid to communication behaviors comprising the reference interview. As a prelude to the formal evaluation of reference services, the technique of peer coaching can be used to raise self- and collegial-awareness of behaviors specific to the reference interview, and can serve as a way of continually evaluating how well users are served. This article reflects on the application of peer coaching to the reference environment, suggests strategies for implementation, and relates peer coaching to the evaluation of reference effectiveness.

PART 2: REFERENCE SOURCES

Select Bibliography and Overview of Bunge's Publications Related to Reference Sources

Julia Gelfand

An "Alms-Basket" of "Bric-a-Brac": Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

Charles A. Bunge

The Omnipaedia Is Here, But Where Is It?

James Rettig

Electronic access to information is transforming both the vision of future libraries and the way in which librarians today deliver information services. In reference service, especially in academic libraries, the wide availability of electronic access to periodical indexes and full-text periodical databases has raised speculation about the possibility of relying on purely electronic reference collections. A field test indicates that this is not yet a viable option and points to the continued vital role of the reference librarian as guide, interpreter, and integrator of print and electronic information sources. In the tradition exemplified by Charles Bunge's "Potential and Reality at the Reference Desk: Reflections on a Return to the Field," this article rests on field experience and testing, and is written in part in the first person.
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Gathering and Using Patron and Librarian Perceptions of Question-Answering Success 115

Charles A. Bunge

This paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of patrons and reference librarians as sources of data for the evaluation of reference question-answering effectiveness, along with ways to enhance the usefulness of data from each source. It describes the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program and discusses some illustrative statistics from the project, including data on relationships between patron-perceived answering success and factors such as staffing patterns, effort spent on answering questions, types and sources of questions, and collection size.

Staffing the Reference Desk in the Largely-Digital Library 141

Steve Coffman
Matthew L. Saxton

This article examines how a centralized, networked reference service might improve efficiency and reduce costs by addressing two long-standing and seemingly intractable problems associated with the reference process—that librarians spend only a small portion of their time at the reference desk actually answering questions, and that many of the questions they do answer could be handled by paraprofessionals. The authors explore the feasibility of a live, centralized, networked reference service in a library setting by comparing traditional reference services at the County of Los Angeles Public Library with a commercial inbound call center designed to handle the same volume of questions. Applying Erlang C, the standard algorithm used to calculate staffing requirements for commercial call centers, the authors find that a networked reference service based on a call center model could reduce the reference staff requirements at the County of Los Angeles Public Library by 42% or more. These results are very preliminary, and the article cautions against jumping to conclusions until we have much better data on the questions we are answering and the reference process as a whole, but the evidence we do have suggests that networked reference services have the potential to truly revolutionize the way we have been doing reference for the past 100 years.

Reference Service: A Field with a View 165

Linda McCann
Ruth Wallach

The advent of new technologies raises a question of the value of one-on-one personalized interaction in the reference environment. The first part of this paper
briefly surveys leading library literature; the second part reports results of an informal survey of practitioners in the field, designed to elicit their views on the influence of theoretical models and new technologies on reference service. It is suggested that while there is no necessary conflict between integration of technology and existing structures in the reference environment, new technology does raise issues that need to be thoughtfully addressed.

PART 4: REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST AND FUTURE OF REFERENCE SERVICE

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Richness vs. Reach: Using Technology to Overcome Economic Impediments to Reference Service 201

Deborah Holmes-Wong

The ability of reference librarians to bring library services into new electronic arenas has been constrained by the inherent conflict within traditional approaches between the reach (number of users that can be served) and the richness (complexity) of its services. Increased use of information technology has brought with it increases in traffic at the reference desk without increases in staffing. Through the application of information technology used in electronic commerce and available on the Internet, libraries may be able to offer customizable electronic reference services to their users that increase both the richness of these services and the number of persons who benefit from them.

Information Literacy in the Reference Environment: Preparing for the Future 213

Hannelore B. Rader

The academic information environment is changing greatly as we enter the millennium. These changes are affecting libraries and, specifically, reference services. In the past and even in recent times librarians have been concerned with library orientation, library instruction, and bibliographic instruction. Now they
have to worry about teaching students and others viable information and computer skills to cope effectively in the information society. Reference work as practiced this century will undergo major changes in the electronic information environment, and the teaching of effective information skills will become a very important component of reference services. The challenges thus presented to academic librarians will be great but success in this area will mean effective professional survival.