

The Art of Reference: Thoughts from a Court Librarian

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Time Zone: 2008 – any Monday Morning

- 8.00 am Log on to computer
- Open email program
- Check emails and rank by urgency
- Check today's news stories
- 8.20 am First phone request
- 8.30 am First visitor – can't work out a citation
- 8.35 am Fix paper jam in photocopier
- Late list of authorities needed for 9.30 court sitting

The juggling act has begun in earnest for the Court Librarian in the 21st century. The daily performance can be accompanied by scripted dialogue that that has been learned over many years or it may be necessary to ad lib as the out of left field queries are tossed on to the stage: sometimes it feels like Groundhog Day and at other times like you've slipped into a Looking Glass World. It is small wonder that we may pause to ask ourselves - is Reference an Art ... a Skill ... a Science ... a Service?

Time Zone: 1870s

Let's step out of the 21st century and open the door on 1876. Samuel Swett Green is writing his highly influential article, "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers"¹, which will be published in the *American Library Journal* and also presented at the 1876 Centennial Conference. Reference librarians, Green stated, should have four goals –

¹ Green, Samuel Swett, 'Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers', (October 1876) 1 *Library Journal*, 74-81.

1. Teaching patrons about the library's functions and resources, as well as how to utilise them;
2. Answering patrons' questions;
3. Helping patrons select good reading material; and
4. Promoting the library to the greater community.

Further,

A librarian should be as unwilling to allow an inquirer to leave the library with his question unanswered, as a shopkeeper is to have his customer go out of his store without making a purchase

Green also extolled the merits of objectivity:

.... Avoid religiously the practice of cramming the minds of young inquirers with one-sided views regarding questions in dispute.

When reading those words a vivid picture surfaced in my mind: over one hundred years after Samuel put pen to paper – in 1979 – I was studying for the Graduate Diploma in Library Studies at the then WA Institute of Technology, listening to one of our lecturers declare passionately – Good reference librarians have no politics, no religion, and no morals! While this professional detachment has always been, for me, the touchstone of librarianship, I would add the proviso that this should not be seen as a licence to condone illegal activities.

Green's final point was that while librarians should do everything possible to assist their patrons, they should avoid making these patrons too dependent. Part of the librarian's function was that of teacher, or guide, helping people to acquire the necessary skills to be able to find information for themselves.

Green's whole philosophy can be defined in very simple form. In 1891, when making the Presidential Address to the American Library Association, he began with the words, "The function of the library is to serve its users"² – again he could well have been addressing my class of 1979, and even today he is still regarded by many writers as being the "father of reference work".³

² Faxon, F W, *Bulletin of Bibliography*, Boston: F W Faxon Company, 102-103.

³ Tyckoson, David, 'On the Desirableness of Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers: The Past and Future of Reference Service', (2003) 31(1) *Reference Services Review*, 12-16.

So one component of Reference is very definitely Service; and the requirement to instruct patrons to become reasonably self-sufficient also encompasses Skill.

In the same decade that Green was writing about library service an undergraduate student, Melville Dewey, working in the library at Amherst College⁴ found it to be ‘disorganised’. Dewey was a man with a passion for order, efficiency, time and labour saving devices, and incidentally an advocate of spelling reform. Dewey recollects the inspiration for the decimal classification system that bears his name –

For months I dreamd night and day that there must be somewhere a satisfactory solution ... The first essential of the solution must be great simplicity.⁵

All library patrons would agree with this: the ability to walk into a library and feel comfortable about exploring the shelves and about approaching the librarians for help when it is needed, but at the same time being left alone to browse without being accosted at every turn. Dewey expands on how he discovered the ‘satisfactory solution’ –

The proverb said “simple as a, b, c,” but simpler than that was 1, 2, 3. After months of study, one Sunday during a long sermon by Pres. Stearns, while I lookt stedfastly at him without hearing a word, my mind absorbed in the vital problem, the solution flasht over me shouting “Eureka!” It was to get absolute simplicity by using the simplest known symbols, the Arabic numerals as decimals with the ordinary significance of nought, the number a classification of all human knowledge in print.⁶

The Library Committee at Amherst was so impressed with Dewey’s proposed “Library Classification System” that they gave him the go ahead to implement it in the College Library. In his 1973-74 report as assistant librarian Dewey summarised the successful application of the new system –

The system is easily understood and applied equally well to a library of a hundred volumes or of a million, it being capable of indefinite and accurate

⁴ Founded in 1821, Amherst is a private liberal arts college and is the third oldest college in Massachusetts, USA.

⁵ *History Notes* 22.02D515: Melville Dewey Classified, <<http://www.amherst.edu/library/news/newsletter/spring02.html#dewey>>, viewed at 1 August 2008.

⁶ *Ibid.*

growth; the system growing with the books in the same direction and at the same rate, an exceedingly desirable thing, wholly unattainable by any other plan yet proposed.⁷

Science has become part of the equation. Knowledge has been captured and classified.

That his “classification for all human knowledge in print” would ultimately prove incapable of dealing with the 20th century (and beyond) explosion of material needing to be classified would likely not have bothered Dewey. If his spirit is still drifting through the great libraries of the world, then he is surely putting together another “solution ... of great simplicity” to bring order to the problem of the world wide web where it has been said –

The net is like a huge vandalized library. Someone has destroyed the catalog and removed the front matter, indexes, etc. from hundreds of thousands of books and torn and scattered what remains. Surfing is the process of sifting through this disorganized mess in the hope of coming across some useful fragments of text and images that can be related to other fragments.⁸

and the process of doing research –

... is like using a library assembled piecemeal by pack rats and vandalized nightly.⁹

Also I think we can speculate that Dewey would no doubt be a passionate aficionado of texting from his mobile phone, using the shorthand versions of words that are now in common use. In 1881, writing from the offices of the *Library Journal*, Dewey declares

Sum day, dear Amherst, may it be my happy lot tu pruv how great iz the love I bear yu. Proud, always, everwher to be counted among yur sonz, I am Very truly, Melvil Dui.¹⁰

Now that we have identified Service, Skill and Science, is it too fanciful to pull all these elements together and produce something that might be called Art.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gorman, Michael, ‘The Corruption of Cataloging’ - (1995) 120 *Library Journal* 34.

⁹ Ebert, Roger quoted in *Library Line*, Irving (TX) Public Library, January 2000 at: <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3858/is_200002/ai_n8884863>, viewed 1 August 2008.

¹⁰ *Mass Moments*, <<http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=137>>, viewed 1 August 2008.

And if it is Art that dominates the foreground of our creation let's just fill in the background and consider the buildings that were erected to house libraries in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century.

Between 1883 and 1929, over 2,500 libraries were built around the world using money donated by the Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. While most were in the United States, the first of Carnegie's public libraries was opened in Dumferline, Scotland (his home town) and still others were built in Britain and Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Serbia, the Caribbean and Fiji.

Carnegie libraries were often the most imposing structures in hundreds of small communities. The architectural styles were varied – Italian Renaissance, Baroque, Classical Revival and Spanish Colonial - but typically simple and formal. Patrons entered through a prominent doorway, nearly always accessed via a staircase. The entry staircase was said to symbolise a person's elevation to learning and outside nearly every library there would be a lamp post or lantern to symbolise enlightenment. Many of these libraries had the motto "Let there be light" inscribed over the entrance.

Inside the libraries the layout encouraged communication with the librarian, as well as creating opportunities for people to discover books on their own – gone were the closed stacks and the need to ask for particular books to be retrieved. In the words of Walter E Langsam, an architectural historian –

The Carnegie libraries were important because they had open stacks which encouraged people to browse – People could choose for themselves what books they wanted to read ...¹¹

Carnegie's own words, written in 1895, encapsulate the tremendous forces of emotion and passion for librarians and libraries that began to swell in the late 19th century –

There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.

Service, Skill and Science all come together: the organisation of the collections, the service provided to patrons, the guidance and instruction provided and the symbiosis of architecture, collections and hunger for knowledge fusing into surely a spectacular

¹¹ Andry, A, "New Life for Historic Libraries", (1999) October 11, *The Cincinnati Post*, 3.

art form. Just as great artists such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Turner, Van Gogh and Picasso changed the way that people saw the world, so too, I would argue, did Green, Dewey and Carnegie open the world of information up to the general population.

The many different libraries in the 21st century, serving not only the needs of the public but also academic institutions, business organisations, government bodies, courts and specialist bodies, all owe their rationale to this heady and exciting elixir that flows from the time of Green, Dewey and Carnegie.

And lest you think that this was strictly a male dominated area let us take one last look at Melville, Melvil – Dewey or Dui – whatever. As Chief Librarian for Columbia University, he founded the Columbia School of Library Economy in 1887. Not only defying the explicit orders of the Trustees not to admit women to the library school, he also declared –

To my thinking, a great librarian must have a clear head, a strong hand, and, above all, a great heart. He must have a head as clear as the master in diplomacy; a hand as strong as he who quells the raging mob or leads great armies on to victory; and a heart as great as he who, to save others, will, if need be, lay down his life. Such shall be the greatest among librarians; and, when I look into the future, I am inclined to think that most of the men who will achieve this greatness will be women.¹²

Time Zone: 1930s

Moving into the 20th century it is instructive to consider S R Ranganathan (1931), the ‘father’ of librarianship in India and his Five Laws of Library Science –

1. Books are for use
2. Every person his or her book
3. Every book its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. The Library is a growing organism

¹² Dewey, Melville, 1899.

For the Reference Librarian all of Ranganathan's Laws are relevant but Law 4 – save the time of the reader – is particularly applicable in today's world of 'on demand' information, especially when we substitute the term 'library resources' for 'books'.

As librarians we select, buy, catalogue and create links to 'library resources' – both in the physical areas of shelved material and through the computer and more recently devices such as mobile phones or PDAs. We are doing that because we know that library resources are there to be used. Unlike Terry Pratchett's librarian, an inhabitant of L-space who is the only one who knows where all the books are, we encourage our users to be able to find their own way around the collection.

We want library patrons to pull books off the shelf, pile them up on the table, and bookmark the information they have found useful. Bookmarks in themselves provide a chance for the librarian to speculate – ones that I have found include bank deposit slips, airline boarding passes, checkout receipts, appointment cards, theatre tickets, used scratchies, old shopping lists, envelopes and even paddlepop sticks (hopefully licked clean).

We want library patrons to step off the edge of the physical library and fly through the cyber universe – destination either a paid subscription or a free resource and to be able to mark the information they find there with the electronic equivalent of a used bus ticket or last week's footy tips.

Law 1 – Books/resources are for use – is still well and truly on the statute book.

Matching the library resource and the person is perhaps the greatest challenge for the reference librarian today, and this is often most evident when new law graduates come into a firm, a government department, an academic institution or a court. In Tasmania law graduates who want to practice have to do a six month Legal Practice Course after graduation. One segment of the course has been an exercise in answering a series of questions using print resources only.

In 2007 this part of the course was either omitted or glossed over. This became evident when, in the second half of the year, the new batch of Judges' Associates commenced in the Supreme Court and we had a higher than usual number of cases that were referring to repealed legislation.

All the Associates had attended the induction program when they started work in July and they were shown where to find the different types of resources in the Library.

When we looked at the legislation collection – ranging from sessional Tasmanian Acts from 1824 to a treasured set of repealed legislation – I could sense the eyes rolling in disbelief and the unspoken thoughts “Like who cares?” and perhaps even “Get a Life!”

In less than a month they were coming in saying “My judge wants and I can’t find it on the Internet” in varying tones of disbelief, annoyance or desperation. It turned out that virtually all their legal research exercises had focussed on the use of electronic resources. To their credit they all listened attentively to my explanations about the limitations of the online legislation database and how to use the print resources in the legislation collection to find what they needed. It was a classic case of Law 2 and by extension Law 3 – Every Person his or her book/resource and Every Book its reader.

Law 4 – saving the time of the reader – while ranking high in the characteristics of a good Reference Librarian – is often not immediately obvious to the patrons. We live in the age of amateurs and like lawyers and doctors we have to accept that the quest for expertise is not limited to the professionally qualified. People probably do waste a lot of time looking for what they want, and when they finally

(a) comes to see you;

(b) email you;

(c) phone or text you; or

(d) use an intermediary

to confide or pass on the message that “I’ve/They’ve been looking for for ages/days/months ... and I/They can’t find” it is sometimes difficult to resist the temptation to say “why didn’t you ask me first?”

Instead I ask about their journey in quest of information, what points they stopped at, what did they see and suggest alternative routes, and point out likely signposts. They may not remember the precise directions but at least next time the library will likely be on their radar earlier when they can’t find that case or piece of legislation that they need to take into court.

The job of the reference librarian is to find stuff and save the time of the patron – when the patron is ready to come to you. And if you can make that patron more self-reliant in future then that is an Art worth performing.

Ranganathan also argued that the library is a growing changing organism ... especially true today with the Internet, email, mobile phones and digital collections. We all have to refine and adapt our reference interview skills to save the time of the reader and to provide him or her with the most appropriate resources.

Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science underpin what reference librarianship is about. And while he named them as 'science' breathing life into them is surely an Art.

Timezone: 1940s

Margaret Hutchins in her *Introduction of Reference Work*, declares –

Reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information for whatever purpose, and also various library activities especially aimed at making information as easily available as possible ...

... by furnishing skilled bibliographical aid in the use of reference materials it saves the time of busy people and ensures the possession of facts which by themselves they could not obtain¹³

Many of today's time travellers would no doubt take one look at Margaret and hop straight back into their Time Machine or Tardis with the parting words: "Get real Babe, It's all on the Internet, right? Google does just fine? I'll look it up on Wikipedia."

But we can't just write Margaret off. Yes the days of humbly approaching the Reference Desk, of being interrogated about your less than perfectly phrased query and being guided to the appropriate texts and helped to find the answers we need and being filled with a wholesome sense of gratitude – yes these days are gone, or perhaps it would be better to say they have undergone a transformation –

"direct personal aid with a library" now extends to contact by email, phone, podcasts, RSS feeds;

¹³ Hutchins, Margaret, *Introduction to Reference Work*, (1944) Chicago: American Library Association.

“making information as easily available as possible” is alive and well and even more crucial in the avalanche of information that threatens to bury people; “skilled bibliographical aid” now encompass web catalogues, intranet links and resource guides.

The traditional strengths of the Reference Librarian have a timeless quality –

- Orientation towards service;
- Ability to determine needs and understand the context;
- Understanding of multiple modes of searching;
- Evaluation of resources; and
- Knowing when to stop.

Timezone: 21st century

Back home and now it is time to take stock of our adventures in the past. That Reference involves Service and Skill is obvious. There are also many persuasive arguments for defining Reference as a Science. The education of our workforce is often set within scientific and technological boundaries as can be seen in the courses/degrees offered by Universities and Colleges.

In its crudest form you can spend \$199 ((US) and get an affordable degree in Library Science from an institution like Rocheville University (US).¹⁴ Simply on the basis on what you already know you can qualify for an accredited degree that is accepted and recognised worldwide. The web page promoting this was a little less than informative about just who would “accept and recognise” and “worldwide” could well have meant anywhere from the Arctic and Antarctica, or the Sahara Desert and the Nullabor Plain – but on the plus side it could be done in just five days.

More seriously you can undertake degrees or diplomas in –

- Applied Science (Library and Information Management)
- Library Technology – Associate Degree of Science
- Bachelor of Science

¹⁴ < <http://www.accredited-degrees-assistance.com/>>, viewed at 1 August 2008

- Bachelor of Information Technology
- Bachelor of Science (Library Technology)

There is quite a strong argument for looking at the profession of librarianship as a science. After all when undertaking reference work

- We use a method;
- We work from the general to the particular;
- We fossick for the gems of information hidden in the information landscape – look back to the past and forward to the future;
- Boolean searching provides us with the formulas;
- We extract the ore, we distil the essence; and
- We assemble everything into the picture – we put the jigsaw together.

It is all so very logical and ‘science’ and ‘technology’ sound much meatier than ‘art’ when talking about educational qualifications and what employers value.

There is a feeling among many librarians today that the profession is in crisis, that they need a new image. In 2005 Candy Hillenbrand¹⁵ identified various mutations of the librarian genus:

- New Breed Librarians¹⁶
- Anarchist Librarians¹⁷
- Shifted Librarians¹⁸
- Underground Librarians¹⁹
- Street Librarians²⁰
- Belly Dancing Librarians²¹
- Naked Librarians²²

¹⁵ Hillenbrand, Candy, “Librarianship in the 21st century – crisis or transformation?”

¹⁶ < <http://www.newbreedlibrarian.org/>> viewed at 1 August 2008.

¹⁷ < http://www.infoshop.org/alibrarians/public_html/>, viewed 1 August 2008.

¹⁸ < <http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/>>, viewed 1 August 2008.

¹⁹ < <http://www.libraryunderground.org/>>, viewed 1 August 2008.

²⁰ < <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/7423/index2.html> >, viewed 1 August 2008.

²¹ < <http://www.sonic.net/~erisw/bdlib.html> >, viewed 1 August 2008.

- Modified Librarians²³

Hillenbrand also focuses on the debate about what we should call ourselves: librarian, information scientist, information manager or knowledge worker. And are the members of the library communities that we serve clients, customers, patrons, users, consumers, stakeholders or simply borrowers?

So why argue that librarianship – and reference librarianship in particular - is an Art? Are we doing ourselves any favours by declaring this to be so?

If we are to be realistic, promoting the idea of Reference as an Art is not likely to dazzle those holding the purse strings in our organisations. Neither will those given the task of ‘reviewing library services’ embrace it with enthusiasm. ‘Art’ implies airy-fairy notions at best and fecklessness at worst. In today’s world where floor space and staff are expensive it is inevitable that pressure will be exerted to make the library justify its existence, to prove its scientific rationale, its economic worth and its return on investment.

So what to do?

Should we abandon the idea of Reference being an Art? Should we reinvent ourselves in the image of the Knowledge Manager, the Information Economist, the Library Scientist? Perhaps even Conan the Librarian or Terry Pratchett’s Librarian!

While the Library in *Discworld* may tempt us with the prospect of infinite shelving in multiple dimensions and an orang-utan who can easily reach the top shelves, sadly in our everyday world there is no formula or equation to give us an equivalent solution. Ultimately we will all work out what ‘Reference’ is in the way that best suits our own goals and beliefs and how they fit in our own organisations.

For my part I have become adept at infiltrating all areas of court business, becoming a necessary cog in the information machinery of the court. On the most basic level I undertake personal delivery of material to judges and court staff; I have learned to understand and use the specialised databases and court systems; and I take responsibility for the web site and keep in regular contact with key personnel as to the content that needs to be published there.

²²<http://brainstormsandraves.com/archives/2002/06/01/naked_librarians_newbreed_librarians_june_is_sue/>, viewed 1 August 2008.

²³<<http://www.bmeworld.com/gailcat/>>, viewed 1 August 2008.

I am not tied to the Reference Desk. I have adapted the Reference Interview to bring it into the loop of 21st century communications and I have ventured out of my comfort zone by engaging in social networking, assessing needs on a one-to-one basis and finding the courage to push for solutions, even when the initial response has been at best patronising and at worst, ridicule.

This determination to gather support for the library and for librarians is grounded in the belief that Reference is more than the mere sum of Service, Skill and Science. It is, for me, truly an Art.