

Hat Trick

Quick-Change Acts @ Reference Workshop

By HALLIE CANTOR, Acquisitions, Yeshiva University

Vendor. Babysitter. And – what else? -- computer geek. Once upon a time the job of a reference librarian was . . . well, reference. Nowadays he or she has to wear a number of hats.

In planning the Reference Workshop, **Leslie Monchar** put on a thinking cap. “I got this great idea,” she said, heading off NYMA’s “Where’s Reference? Changes in the Library, a Changed Librarian: Three Perspectives” held Monday, May 11, 2015, at the Park Avenue Synagogue and co-hosted by **Bruchie Weinstein**.

Confronting the “incredible shrinking librarian,” Leslie realized the chance to address the changing nature of reference work in a high-tech age where science fiction has become more science as in Q, less fiction as in P. She arrived at the following conclusion: “Library reference did not shrink. The role got bigger.”

Nouns & Verbs

After a brief but pleasant tour of the historic Park Avenue Synagogue – its Moorish-style sanctuary dedicated in 1927; the stained glass chapel by abstract expressionist Adolph Gottlieb; and The Edmond de Rothschild Library – NYMA’s program took off with **Beth Bidlack** -- Director, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University Libraries – and “The Ever-Changing Nature of Reference:

From People, Spaces, and Collections to Actions.”

Beth began by giving out questionnaires. Having had extensive work in collections development, as well as weeding, Beth broadly defined reference librarianship. “Number one: to work effectively within an institution, a reference librarian must identify with his or her place of employment.”

Beth’s place of employment, Union Theological Seminary, is now managed by Columbia University. This makes for strange bedfellows and dynamics: as the missions change, the funding changes, along with the priorities. Therefore, she said, “The reference changes.” She is there to advance the learning of both places, with an eye on the needs of both institutions.

“Reference is a noun,” she announced. Reference, as in academia, comprises a number of things – people, spaces, things – and above all, collections. To her, collections and reference are one and the same.

“So what does a reference librarian do?” she asked, as we read off our questionnaires. “Anticipates needs.” “Provides questions and answers.” “Advise and recommend.”

When it boils down to teaching – and it always does -- we have to “verbify.” Reference becomes training, Beth explained, enabling people to find things for themselves.

But the verb “reference” is no longer in the singular.

Once upon a time, a library might have one “reference expert,” the proverbial stern, matronly figure behind a “fortress”-like desk. Today, this stereotype has gone the way of the card catalog.

Reference work today may consist of a staff – professionals, paraprofessionals, interns, volunteers. On some campuses, the reference librarian has even become a “subject specialist.”

The term “reference” has been changed to “research,” with a staff’s multiple functions – i.e. instruction, selection – becoming team-based, rather than the work of one individual. Even the title “reference” has changed – to “research and instruction support.”

Today, chances of working only with reference are slim to none. The reference librarian might wear different hats, some piled atop one head, or shared with staff. Reference may extend even beyond the institution – to vendors, for example, or in consortia or PDA. Like doctors, reference librarians are often on call for questions – through webpage, e-mail, or texting – and must set up private appointments or consultations with patrons.

What type of reference questions do they get?

“Questions come back, but not the same as in the 1980s,” Beth replied. Fewer are fact-based, which have been largely co-opted by Google or Wikipedia. Some, of course, are simply dir-

ectional; staff then decides who is the best one to answer.

Why is the nature or content of questions different? Essentially, student behavior has changed. "People think they can do it themselves," Beth said.

What a student thinks he or she is looking for, however, is not what is stated in the syllabus, which is often held up from a smartphone. This person seeks a way to communicate, to frame a question within the right context. The reference librarian becomes the tutor, getting this student up to speed.

The problem becomes acute among populations that are culturally or educationally disadvantaged. Here, a teacher's hat is needed: the ability to motivate young people to learn, given the changing nature of modern curricula that can leave many students uninspired.

Beth gave out another exercise sheet. "What are the key components of reference space?"

No longer is the desk the focal, or even the best, point. Many are placed or designed around the stacks. The trend is informality, as some libraries even have built-in cafes; and flexibility, with reference desks becoming "information commons." This reconfiguration, from fortress to open space, may suggest a society less hierarchical and more egalitarian.

Therefore, the reference librarian is no longer keeper of the keys: he or she will walk around and communicate with students. The effect is collaborative: the student is one expert, the librarian another. Reference even extends beyond the physical, as librarians must

often code, assist in IT, or visit campus places, laptops on hand, to become available.

And the last question: "What about things?" Meaning materials – as in acquisition, placement, and removal?

Distinguishing the reference from circulation depends on a number of criteria – chiefly the content. Here a reference librarian might even have to don a cataloger's hat. Also taken into account are rare or out-of-print materials, which may belong in a special "in-library use only" section, or assigned readings that might be placed at the Reserve desk.

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These days, amending or weeding collections are often data-driven. Changing patron demographics often determine selection, entailing interviews with primary user groups.

What is the general trend in reference itself? Downsizing – or right-sizing, as print resources migrate online, improving browsing abilities. Like an accountant, the librarian must determine different pricing models – i.e. annual vs. perpetual, or licensing.

"Which now leaves us," Beth proudly concluded, "to reference as a verb."

So does reference librarianship have a future?

"Yes!" Beth exclaimed. "But be aware how to train people," since the reference librarian, as supervisor, must deal with an entire group of staff, patrons, faculty, and administration.

Evolution & Revolution

Some hats never change; others sadly go out of style.

Shaindy (Susan) Kurzmans -- College Archivist, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Ramapo College of New Jersey – has not only worn them all, but seen them in all shapes and sizes.

"I went through all paths," she asserted, "worked at many places. I performed crucial functions in all," her opening remark in "Reference at Ramapo: Evolution and Revolution." Wherever she went, every library was "her" library. In all of them, power was in her hands: as reference librarian, she felt totally in control.

Librarians are part of a long chain of educators – showing students not only what to read, but how to find and evaluate information. However, whatever the latest trend or innovation, the bottom line remains: a service of helping.

Shaindy gave a brief history of Ramapo, initially a "hippie" school – "faculty, mainly" – with a funky vibe and even a cocktail bar where classes were held. Vestiges of that era include an egalitarian spirit: the librarian is accorded faculty status and considered, like faculty, as part of the bargaining unit, with the same benefits – plus a 24/7 career to boot! The George T. Potter Library caters more to the 65% who are residential

(Cont'd on pg. 10)

(Ref Workshop, cont'd)

versus the 35% commuter. As most come from northern New Jersey, the demographic is not tremendously diverse.

Shaindy described reference as the “face of the library.” There is no fortress-like desk for reference services – rather, a casual standing terminal, with places for patrons. Nevertheless, “How we present ourselves can add or detract from student services.” Some services, however, remain traditional or mundane – i.e. hours or restroom inquiries.

Patrons “meet” material through reference. The “lurker” might hang around and listen to the way other students voice their questions. Like a coach, the reference librarian must spend time guiding them.

In addition, librarians provide online or phone answers, and set up reference interviews for further help. Delivery of service is highly crucial in this fast-paced era of e-mail, texting, and chat. The nature of the job now is “research help,” instead of reference.

Students are offered baby-steps through the query and research process, under the librarian’s careful air of approachability and attentiveness. Statistics are kept, though not scrupulously, on the number and nature of questions; for this Shaindy’s library prefers print, rather than software (e.g. Desk Tracker). Typically, questions are more research-oriented than quick and factual, which now are looked up on Google.

Reference has become collaborative, thanks to state-wide consortia. In September 2004 Ramapo joined *Qanda NJ*

whereby librarians provide interactive assistance and can even check other’s databases, if they both share subscriptions. (Funding ended in June 2011.)

In addition to college students, Shaindy is now helping lower-education patrons and answering children’s pertinent questions. Students can now log in 24/7 and contact anyone for help. Various software programs like Senduit.com store webpages for the amount of time specified.

Online chat presents some of its own challenges. In-house, held during regular reference hours only and usually covered at research help desk, involves SMS texts (some limited to 141 characters) or programs like

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Meebo, or LibraryH3lp.com.

Speedy fingers are needed to type long answers for patrons short on patience and attention-spans. Service is delivered via e-mail: response time depends on the calendar, with weekdays having a 24-hour wait, weekends not until Monday.

In the changing face of reference, Shaindy has seen the shift from print to online, with the purchase of more e-ref sources. Among the growth of collaborative workstations and information commons, the proverbial research help desk seems to have gotten lost. In fact, in this day and age, should there be any desk at all?

Here Shaindy waxed philosophical: somewhere along the way, has serendipity gotten lost? Amid the reconfiguration of reference collections, what do we lose, along with the reference desk? The “soul” of the library? A survey, however, revealed that only 4 out of 51 libraries interviewed got rid of the physical desk.

There still remains a separation between reference and circulation. Like Beth, Shaindy has become the itinerant librarian, laptop in hand, traipsing to dorms which have become “library places” with personalized service.

The reference librarian may counsel students one-on-one through standalone or library classes. Even a generalist can offer specialized courses in subject research.

A reference librarian may also offer remediation, as a partner in the Educational Opportunity Fund Program, geared toward students from the underprivileged school districts who may need assistance even before the term begins. From this Shaindy learned: “there is a fine line between reference and information literacy” and another way to connect on a more intimate level.

Shaindy displayed various online LibGuides, explaining the other effects of online migration. As distance learning has become integrated into colleges and universities through programs such as Moodle or Blackboard, the librarian becomes embedded in online or hybrid courses.

As students’ needs have largely migrated online, remote



Holograph. Kinnereth/music by S. Alman.
London, 1935. (from Jacob Beigel Collection, The Jewish Theological Seminary Jewish Music Archive.)

Spring Conference, cont'd

tions of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel to the Civil Rights movement.

Dr. Kahn presented an overview of Ashkenazi liturgical and Yiddish popular or theater music in Central and Eastern Europe, and the U.S. The music archives consist of the following:

- 1) Documents such as correspondence, clipping, photos, etc. -- described by finding aids available on JTS's website;
- 2) Music scores which are described in cataloging records available in JTS's library catalog and in OCLC.

Many of the early manuscripts came from Germany, and to a lesser degree, Russia, where the Society for Jewish Folk Music, in St. Petersburg, was established in 1908. Eventually melodies and their composers were transplanted -- or born -- on American shores. Through the use of both Ashkenazic liturgy and Yiddish popular song, Dr. Kahn managed to introduce musical topics to an audience of appreciative non-musicians.

All presentations showed the evolving role of librarian-archivist into a virtual (pun intended) museum curator -- preserver of both history and culture. NYMA expresses gratitude to JTS for graciously hosting this event and showcasing their collections. And a big, special thanks to **Naomi Steinberger**, Director of JTS Library Services, for her input, forethought, and cooperation.

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(Reference Workshop, cont'd)

manuscripts like the Aleppo Codex; or Alexander Marx (1878-1953), renowned librarian at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

David also discussed heroes of the library world during the Holocaust -- among them Rabbi Efraim Oshry (1914-2003), who compiled responsa in the Kovno Ghetto; and YIVO archivist **Dina Abramowitz** (1909-2000),

who survived the Vilna Ghetto, where the Nazis aimed to create an archive dedicated to the "destroyed race." As the deportations swept through the streets, librarians scrambled to hide their beloved books. Thanks to their efforts, these items survived.

Ultimately, what all these individuals shared was a love of Hebrew text. Mentioning the Rambam's famous reverence of books, David explained: the

librarian was a scholar first; sharer, preserver, and manager of knowledge.

The past, present, and -- it is hoped -- future clearly show that the reference librarian isn't going away too soon. Hats may be reshaped or restyled, but ultimately there is one that stays on many a head: provider of information. Thank you, Leslie and Bruchje, for an outstanding afternoon!

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