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Re-conceptualizing the ‘reference transaction’ – the case for interaction and information relationships at the public library reference desk

Abstract: Preliminary data from a larger ethnographic case study using observation and interviewing techniques in 2 reference desk ecologies in a Canadian urban public library are presented. The reference encounter is characterized from a knowledge sharing perspective; the experiential and communication dimensions of the client-staff information relationship are explored.

1. Introduction

As arms-length municipal government services, public libraries are under similar funding restraints as those pressuring Canada’s largest cities. Structural funding and taxation inequity, combined with a dynamic information and communications technology, new approaches to public sector governance and demands accountability, and increasing user expectations, are driving public libraries to make strategic changes and to reposition their organization and their services (Fielding, 2000).

Implied throughout the survivalist discourse of public libraries during the past decade and through this process of reassessing public library philosophy, values and politics, is the question of the library’s value. The ongoing research question is, as Durrance & Fisher (2003) note, “what differences do libraries and librarians make in the lives of individuals, their families, neighborhoods, the community organizations that serve them, and the larger community?” (542-543). Value is used widely and defined variously depending on its context within LIS field. Different from values as beliefs, value in this context suggests a tangible or intangible benefit – social, economic, or other, combining both the more traditional quantifiable measures such as reference transactions or circulation figures with the more qualitative measures of satisfaction and social benefits. What remains outside most formal performance measurement evaluation models is the affective, experiential evidence of the library’s value and goodness at the personal, network and community levels (Durrance & Fisher, 2003). As suggested in an exploratory study (Allen, 2003), non-economic factors may have a greater impact on funding for libraries than economic factors. Moreover, the study also notes that perceived quality of service, represented by public opinion on the future of public libraries, also had no significant correlation with library funding levels. In sum, the many ways library services are evaluated and valued remain in “creative turmoil” (Durrance & Fisher, 2003, 321).
To ensure their place in their community’s current and future “knowledge economy” (Drucker, 1993) public libraries need to adapt themselves as organizations. Knowledge has become the new form of currency that is exchanged and valued. With some exceptions, today’s typical (and traditional) urban public library is experiencing limited growth in terms of its core output measures - circulation and reference transactions – while the library is experiencing increased use of its digital library services (Canadian public library statistics, 2003). Budget reductions by local government have compelled some library boards to reduce services; threats of library closures continue to occur (Proctor & Simmons, 2000) suggesting that somehow libraries have not established their niche in this knowledge economy (Davenport, 1997; Drucker, 1993). The other major pressure emerging for public libraries also as a result of the global shift to a knowledge economy has come from the introduction of the Internet, the web and related information and communication technologies (ICT). More and more traditional public library users now look to the Internet and the web to fill their immediate simple and complex information gaps. ICTs have simplified many activities to the unit of the transaction. The Internet provides access to an enormous amount of unfiltered, primary information quickly and easily 24 hours a day. While libraries may have a web presence, knowledge assets including library collections and staff account for between 65 and 82% of the Canadian urban public libraries’ budgets (CULC, 2005).

In this context, then, is it reasonable to argue for increased funding for public libraries when the Internet is such a powerful, alternative information source? To help decision-makers debate the larger questions raised by this situation, it is important to understand first if, and in what ways, the public library does already or might strengthen its participation in the 21st century knowledge society? These preliminary findings from one phase of larger ethnographic study reveal knowledge sharing practises at the public library reference desk as having potential value beyond the transactional level and in so doing, suggest directions for public libraries to develop their services for the citizens of the knowledge society.

2. Conceptual approach

To study the library’s role as a knowledge-based community institution, we must first conceptualize the generic public library institution to establish common ground. Regardless of whether they have used the library personally or of which public library in which community they have used, most citizens with 20th century experience residing in any North American community recognize a ‘public library’ and understand its central mission and goals. There are three dimensions of the public library’s institutional identity that form this central role as a community information and knowledge centre: the library as both a physical and civic space, the library as a knowing organization, its particular management structures and organizational culture in which it operates and the the provision of human-centered, mediated access to information services and resources. These dimensions are briefly discussed with reference to their origins in the LIS literature and to their significance for the library’s relevance in a knowledge economy.

2.1 Library as public (civic) space
Public libraries both create and inhabit public space while identifying themselves with the communities in which they are situated and whom they exist to serve. And although public libraries traditionally define themselves geographically, they also conceptualize themselves by their communities on other levels. Habermas’ work on the public sphere is slowly entering library literature as an important aspect of the library’s past and an indication of the direction it should take in the future (Buschman, 2003; Muddiman & Black, 1993; Budd, 2001; McCook, 2004; Webster, 1995; Williamson, 2000). The public sphere is an unfettered intellectual space in this context. Webster (1995) situates the public library mission within this Habermasian domain:

…the public service ethos, conceived as an outlook which, in the informational realm at least, was committed to dispassionate and neutral presentation of information and knowledge to the widest possible public, irrespective of people’s abilities to pay, can be regarded as closely consonant with an orientation essential to the effective functioning of the public sphere (104).

Libraries have experienced an increasing tension between presenting themselves in this more ‘pure’ public intellectual role and their pressure to be competitive in the marketization of information and knowledge services, a ‘faked version’ of the public sphere (Buschman, 2003; Birdsall, 1994; McCabe, 2001; McCook, 2000).

The doctrine of the public sphere is also realized in the regular construction of new libraries and the increased use of public library buildings as public spaces (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002; Mattern, 2002; McCook, 2004). The increasing influence or the encroaching of private market interests is also supported in studies of the use of public library space (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). Based on their observational study, Given & Leckie (2003) identify three primary uses of library spaces in two Canadian central libraries as reading, writing and talking. Talking to other patrons represents between 12 and 20% of the most commonly observed behaviour. This finding supports the “library as an interactive place” versus the “library as [only] quiet space” (382). A series of studies from the University of Sheffield on the effect of library closures and the reductions in library hours on their communities (Bryson, Usherwood & Proctor, 2003; Simmons & Proctor, 1999) supports the citizenry’s expectations to have access to their public library as their own, physical community space: “the building-based local library was shown to have a value which is distinctive and irreplaceable by any alternative form of provision” (108).

2.2 Library as knowing organization

The public library as “knowing organization” including its philosophical origins in social epistemology crosses many disciplines beyond LIS (Budd, 2001; Choo, 2006; Davenport, 1997). Knowledge is defined as broadly as “justified true belief” or actionable information-in-context (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) in contrast with information which is more static and stable. In the discourse of the knowledge society, however, knowledge and information creation, sharing and use processes have been
characterized by a transactional and objectivist orientation. Knowledge is often described as an asset to be captured, measured, shared or exchanged, and used. Providing access to knowledge and information through library collections and services continues to be the core function of the public library’s mission.

Three types of knowledge (explicit, tacit and cultural knowledge) form the basis of the knowing organization framework (Choo, 2006) and these types of knowledge are built on three approaches to information use – knowledge creation, sharing and knowledge use or decision-making. The knowing organization comprises three strategic information processes that together create a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation, a “knowing cycle” (18). The information processes of sensemaking, knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing for decision-making each has its own objectives and behaviours that characterize each of their aspects; they are also complementary and interdependent.

Whereas explicit knowledge is clearly object-centered, often captured through information and communication technologies - in library books and databases, for example, tacit knowledge has a much more subjectivist orientation. Tacit knowledge is personal knowing informed by our judgement (Tsoukas, 2005) because it is located in “personal knowledge used by members to perform their work and to make sense of their worlds. It is learned through extended periods of experiencing and doing a task during which the individual develops a feel for, and a capacity to make intuitive judgements about, the successful execution of the activity” (Choo, 2006, ). Tacit knowing and tacit knowledge are enacted in the human-centered mediating processes; unlike explicit knowledge, evidence of tacit knowledge is rarely present in the Google information world. Tacit knowledge has several properties that make it difficult to contain: it is vectorial in that we know the particulars of something by relying on our awareness of them for attending to something else and it is phenomenal in the sense that we transform our subsidiary experience into a new sensory experience. Tacit knowledge is really only tacit knowing, it can only be displayed – manifested – in what we do, never captured and finally “new knowledge comes about not when the tacit becomes explicit but when our skilled performance – our praxis – is punctuated in new ways through social interactions” (Tsoukas, 2005, 159).

Another aspect of the “knowing organization” is that it is located in an ecological, socially constructed space where knowing is created and where informed decision-making occurs. Nonaka & Konno (1998) label this place “ba”; it is also resonant of Boisot’s I-Space (1995) and Bourdieu’s “habitus” (Lincoln, 2002). In this sense, place is more than a location; it is all of the conversations and gaps between tacit and explicit knowledge, between individuals, networks, organizations and communities and while it has an aspect of limits or boundaries, it also transcends cultural boundaries when necessary to create or apply knowledge. The knowing space is not fixed, but is constantly being defined; it is a space constantly in a state of enactment.

2.3 Provision of human-mediated access to information and knowledge

The provision of information and reference services is a core function in any public library (McCook, 2004). Central to the reference service are the information
librarians, their information resources, and their clients. The knowledge sharing process employed in this setting is the reference interview, defined as:

>a purposive conversation between the librarian and the user in which the librarian asks one or more questions in order 1) to get a clearer and more complete picture of what the user wants to know and 2) to link the user to the system (Ross, Dewdney & Nilsen, 2002, 4).

The reference interview is distinguished from other types of conversation in several ways: it is highly desirable for the interviewer to do more listening than talking; interviews involve the asking and answering of questions; interviews are directed toward a purpose; redundancy and repetition are encouraged; multiple means of reflecting content are used by the interviewer to ensure the interviewee has been accurately heard and reference interviews are highly structured (2-3). Librarians are instructed to ignore these other types of conversations that might also take place in a reference interview in order to focus attention on assisting the client in filling their information gap. The information system to which users are referred is usually an objective, explicit knowledge base, information1, “which describes the innate structure or pattern of reality, data” (Dervin, 1976). Users, by contrast, often come to the encounter with their subjective information, known as information2, “ideas, the structures or pictures imputed to reality by people”. We can also recognize information2 as tacit knowledge. The reference task is for users and librarians to bridge their own knowledge gaps by objectifying the problem sufficiently so that it can be resolved by the library’s explicit knowledge systems and herein lies a significant communication challenge.

In Dervin’s terms, tacit knowing is part of the reference interview because the interview integrates the user’s subjective or personal information with the library’s objective or system-based information. Like tacit knowledge which is technically informed by mental models that are often taken for granted (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), reference interviews are also shaped by both the librarian’s and the client’s mental models of the information systems and the information problems (Dewdney & Michell, 1996). Another critical aspect of the reference interview process is that library clients approach the reference service with gaps in their understanding, seeking to find meaning always in the context of their concerns within time-space (Dervin, 1999). Clients ask questions or seek information to fill gaps in their knowledge and to enable them to then “do something” (Ross et al, 2002, 31). In this sense, the reference interview is an exercise in contextualizing the knowledge gap and therefore is also a sensemaking exercise from both Weickian and Dervinian perspectives.

As technology-enabled service delivery modes for communicating in the reference process are explored using online social networking software and other ICTs, the communication dimensions of the reference interview become increasingly explicit. Unlike symmetrical conversations between individuals, however, the reference process is less a complementary communication relationship because of inherent differences in power, control and status between user and reference librarian (Dervin, 1977; Radford, 1999). The communication relationship between client and librarian is more than
simply the resolution of an information query; communication can create connections in a way that makes information exchange more likely and more effective (Nardi, 2005).

The outputs of the reference process are defined as “reference transactions” and reference questions (and answers) have been a cornerstone of public library service in North America since at least 1876 (Rabner & Lorimer, 2002). To describe the reference process and record its outputs as a performance measurement, virtually all North American public libraries define the reference transaction in similar language to this:

A standard reference transaction is a request for information made directly by a library user that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff (Ontario Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Libraries Branch, 2006).

Reference service is a human-mediated information seeking process where information and knowledge – both system-based and experiential - meet in both the client and the library staff member’s exchanges around an information question or problem. It combines both the art of skilful interpersonal communication and mental modelling of the library staff and clients, with the science of locating information using the library’s expert systems of knowledge organization. Although it continues to be defined more narrowly in an objective transactional mode – where ‘objective’ output is the desired goal, the reference interaction appears far more complex than any computerized intelligence agents have thus far been able to mimic (Nardi & O’Day, 1998).

2.4 Research question

The knowing organization is an organization in the process of knowing, not simply an organization that contains knowledge or as is the case with the public library, an organization simply in the business of providing access to information and knowledge. But even in grammatical terms, it is the shift from knowledge as ‘object’ to knowledge as ‘verb’ (knowing) where opportunities for libraries to advance themselves in this so-called knowledge society lie. By continuing to adhere to a more conduit or linear model of public library service, libraries as organizations can miss, in Dervinian terms, the dynamic opportunities for sharing, informing and knowing with their community members which are socially constructed in communication spaces such as the library’s information or reference service. And such opportunities may provide clues to the development of future library services in an Internet-competitive information environment.

The three dimensions discussed here constitute the urban public library’s core identity at two levels – the macro and micro-community levels. In the macrocosm of urban life, the library institution provides unique public spaces and services to facilitate information and knowledge sharing and use. Using the reference desk as the micro-community for this conceptual model, the following research question may be posed:
What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients around the reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?

3. Study methodology

The data presented in this paper are preliminary and are part of a larger doctoral study described here. An ethnographic case study of the knowledge creation, sharing and use processes between and among librarians and library clients in the physical spaces at a public library, through the researcher’s observations of interactions among these informants in their environment is the appropriate method. A knowledge ecology is socially constructed, human-centered, and constantly evolving and thus it fits easily within the naturalist research paradigm. In practice, the accounts of the people we study should be treated as “social phenomena that we are seeking to understand and explain” and we must “suspend our own beliefs that conflict with those being described and explained. Otherwise there is a danger of misunderstanding” (Patton, 1990, 75). Using an ethnographic approach, the researcher became participant observer, a strategy referred to as an ‘omnibus field strategy in that ‘it simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection’” (231).

The goodness of naturalistic research is established by the “trustworthiness and authenticity” of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) where the inquirer’s posture is as “‘passionate participant’ … facilitator of multivoice reconstruction” (170). In this study, the researcher was a participant researcher with extensive prior experience and knowledge of the study setting and with limited prior working relationships with some of the study participants employed by the library. Steps were taken throughout the study both to establish researcher boundaries and to ensure researcher trustworthiness. Additional methodological diligence was undertaken through means such as explicit clarification, written documentation of processes and decisions and through efforts at researcher transparency at every incremental stage of this study.

This study was conducted at branch libraries in a major Canadian urban public library system between May 2006 and March 2007. In order to achieve the “thick description” characteristic of ethnographic studies, the researcher observed reference service activities at four branch libraries of varying sizes – small, medium and large - reflecting the service delivery model of the library system. She recorded activities and conversations that occurred at these desks on her laptop computer and without audio-recording. An advantage of this approach is that the knowledge sharing and use processes within different sub-units can be compared within the same organizational culture in addition to aggregating results at the system level. The study advisory committee consisting of five members of the public library including two representatives from the street-level public service and from middle management, and two representative clients from the library system provided guidance on study design and facilitated all site communication. Periodic information meetings were held during the study period. At
each site, pre-observation and post-observation meetings were held with staff to facilitate the researcher’s entry and exit into the research sites.

Among the branches in this urban public library system (URPLO), a short list of potential study branches was developed by the researcher and designated representatives from the Library’s administration based on these criteria: a) representative of the 3 tiers of the Library’s service delivery model b) presence of a separate reference desk c) without any extraordinary features such as co-location with another community service d) using analysis of previous year reference statistics showing branches with higher than the overall average number of adult reference questions answered and e) more questions asked in English than in French. Although all branch libraries in any municipal library system serve individual communities characterized uniquely by their socio-economic and other factors, these branches were selected primarily by size and then with the intention only that they represent the ‘generic library branch’ anywhere in urban Canada at the broadest level. Despite the uniqueness of this ‘case’ of reference interactions, steps were deliberately taken to select branches that could perhaps be ‘recognized’ by library workers and clients in other similar institutions. No branch that was invited to participate declined and no staff members at participating branches declined to participate.

Altogether 170 hours of observation at reference desks were conducted – approximately 50 hours in each of the small, medium and large branch libraries each over four-week periods and 20 hours at the pilot branch over three weeks. Observation shifts were distributed across each branch's open hours so that morning, afternoon and evening shifts were included; weekend shifts were also included, and also based on the activities at the branch. For shifts where weather appeared to uncharacteristically limit user traffic, the hours were repeated at another time. In total, 540 observed interactions between library clients and library staff were noted. Thirty-three interviews with library staff and clients were conducted. Data analysis followed the coding processes and considerations discussed by qualitative methodologists (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006; Patton, 1990).

Interviews with staff and members of each branch library community were conducted and audio-recorded following each branch observation period. Documents directing the business of reference service system-wide and locally in each branch were identified through question and observation of all study participants and based on the researcher’s prior knowledge of the organization. Documents were analyzed, including, for example, “information desk” manuals, reference policies, reference services guidelines and reference staff job descriptions. One branch library was used as a pilot site to test the study tools including a structured observation matrix and interview guides. Signs were posted at all desks and around the branches beginning one week prior to the observation periods indicating that the study would be commencing. Following observations and interviews at this pilot site, some modifications were made to both the staff and client interview guides consisting of re-wording interview questions and the original structured observation matrix was discarded as it was proven to be too prescriptive and inflexible to accommodate all the types of activities that were being observed. In its place, all reference desk activities including all personal approaches to
the desk were written into notes by the researcher who was positioned beside the desk staff with her laptop, with a nametag identifying her by name with the sub-title “student”.

4. Data analysis

There are three primary categories of data in this study: a) researcher notes from the information desk, on observed interactions including verbatim conversations with and among staff and the researcher’s reflections and field notes b) transcripts of interviews with a selection of library staff and clients and c) documentary evidence of the policies, procedures and human resource policies, directing the work of the reference service from the Library administration and local branch perspectives.

Reference interaction and reference transaction are defined separately in this context. A reference transaction refers to the standard reference query noted previously; reference interaction includes any verbal or non-verbal, in-person approach to the reference or information desk by a library client. Because this study focuses on the inter-personal knowledge sharing among library clients and reference staff in the library’s physical reference desk space, only face-to-face transactions have been recorded. Three levels of coding and categorizing were applied to the observed information desk interactions of the Pilot Branch (PB) and Small Branch (SB). These coding levels can be characterized as 1) normative 2) descriptive and 3) formative (Vicente, 1999). Interactions were coded by location and by type of query in each level. Time of interaction was only noted by desk shift (e.g. 10:00 am to 1:00 pm) in which it occurred and gender was also noted. Researcher field notes were placed in a separate file for theoretical and methodological consideration. Notes on conversations between and among staff and the researcher that were not directly part of a particular interaction were also placed into a separate file for analysis.

The normative coding scheme is based on the current, common framework used by public libraries for “counting reference transactions”. As required to qualify for their portion of provincial funding, every Ontario regional and municipal library must record and annually report statistics describing their service outputs in various ways. These statistics are then tabulated and published in an annual report. Reference transactions are among the outputs counted; the instructions for data collection prescribe transactions that are to be included and those kinds of queries that are to be excluded. The latter group includes these categories: “requests for directions, information on locations”; “interlibrary loan requests”; “questions about rules or policies”; “requests for assistance about the use of the library and its services”; “shelf checks and simple checks of the library catalogue for specific items” (Annual survey of public libraries: definitions and instructions, 2006). At the descriptive level, all interactions were coded according to both the included and excluded categories and other categories were developed if necessary so that all interactions could be described. This level created a comprehensive description of the interactions – accounting for all types of interactions present. At the formative level, a thematic taxonomy was constructed based on an iterative process of coding, identifying themes and re-coding initially by building on key terms and key
concepts such as “experiential or tacit knowing”, “learning”, “experience”, “communication”, “previous knowledge”, “cultural knowledge” and “explicit knowledge”. Documentary evidence, field notes, staff conversations and interview transcripts were coded at this level using the same concepts. Formal coding of interviews consisted of identification of narrative fragments and narrative structures such as a chronology that might be suggested by a participant’s statement, “I first started using the library when …” (Boje, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Documents were also coded according to the participants’ frequency of use, and reported knowledge of or familiarity with their contents.

An externally facilitated focus group of observed participants provided them with opportunities to validate (or not) the data analysis methods and some preliminary interpretations, through reading of a sample of observation transcripts and researcher interpretations. This focus group also gave opportunity for external evidence of the researcher’s trustworthiness to study participants. The following discussion is based on 129 analyzed interactions, 71 at SB and 58 at PB, 7 staff interviews and 5 patron interviews and their relevant documentary evidence.

5. Findings and discussion

Narrow definition of the reference transaction. 38% (27) of the interactions were coded as “reference transactions” at SB and 50% (29) of the interactions were coded as “reference transactions” at PB. The remaining transactions did not easily fall into clusters or categories because neither did they fall under the ‘exclusions’ list provided in this framework. For example, some interactions involved completing a job application for library employment, picking up talking books for a homebound patron, or completing a suggestion to purchase form to add a title to the library’s collections. While these interactions are not strictly reference transactions which link an information problem to “one or more information sources or bibliographic tools”, they do share some characteristics with Dervin’s time-space reference gap and thus could be interpreted as reference questions. These questions were also referred to as the “how do I make something work?” category (PB Librarian2) which includes more than how to use equipment or technology, it includes making the ‘library system’ work. At the descriptive level of coding, question categories were added such as “linking patron to library services” and “using library computers”. These findings suggest that there is some disconnect between the kinds of interactions that are taking place at reference desks, and the larger explicit and organizational purpose of the reference desk. Should we be counting other types of interactions at the reference desk beyond the most narrow transaction? Is transaction the most accurate characterization of the process of resolving a subjectivist/objectivist time-space reference problem?

The use of chit-chat. A number of the library staff and clients describe this notion of “chit-chat” or “small talk” as a means of engaging with their clients. This verbal bond or ‘glue’ serves a number of purposes at the reference desk. It was initially described and labelled by staff at PB:
Chit chat would be something that’s not directly connected to the question at hand – so it could be while I’m looking up something for somebody talking about the fact that ‘hey we’ve got a knitters club’ and I noticed you’ve done some gorgeous stuff before – do you have a favourite type of yarn and we had somebody who loved this book …. Well knowing that somebody has a preference for a certain style of knitting may seem completely inconsequential at the time, knowing the fact that there is that style of knitting may come in handy at another time. (PB Librarian2 Interview)

I think that small chit-chat makes it feel like a more approachable environment, usually when you’re chit-chatting, you’ve got a smile on your face, you’re usually talking about something that’s not always a pleasurable conversation, but for the most part it is … and the chit-chat with the patrons, with the public, even if you’ve never had a reference interaction with them, just seeing them come in on a regular basis and saying hello and start having a little bit of a relationship with them means that someday when they do have difficulty finding what they want, the will have no problems about coming to you. And it makes them realize that you’re there and you’re there for that, if you can sort of initiate this chit-chat” (PB Librarian1 Interview).

Chit-chat was noted in 18% of the verbal interactions at each of these locations – and it was verbalized in various ways. It is a very clear aspect of knowledge sharing and personal connection in the reference process. In an interaction that began as a question about using library computers to access digital photos, it ended with a personal exchange with the staff member about being a grandparent: “I’m going to have another grandson…they show you how old I’ve become.” (SB22). In another interaction, the use of personal talk occurs around reading tastes between the staff member and the patron alternating “have you read … I liked this one … but not that one because ….”(SB34). It is reasonable to ask if chit-chat is always required for the reference interaction and the answer is clearly not. But as in any human-mediated interaction, we cannot always manage or control our behaviours and cognitions to fit into a rational, objectified model of information behaviour. Chit-chat at the reference desk provides what Nardi (2005) describes as the preliminary “field[s] of connection”, a “labile multidimensional space comprised of feelings of affinity, commitment and attention” (92). Such connections are regularly required as a way of promoting readiness for effective communication and information exchange.

Automated catalogue as knowledge repository and narrative prop. In many instances, library clients were invited to co-browse with the staff member at the reference desk computer, as a way for the staff member to instruct the client if requested (“would you like to see what I’m doing?”), as a way for the client to visually see what ‘progress’ was occurring on the part of the staff member in answering their inquiry, as a way of breaking down the physical barriers between the client and the staff member, as a way of showing the answer to the patron, so that they could see it and validate it themselves. In this sense, the computer functions as an explicit knowledge container, and as a ‘prop’ in the interaction narratives. Staff were often asked “what does the computer say about this book?” to which the staff member would reply, “it says that we [don’t] have a copy …. ” In each location, the configuration of the reference desk differed according to the space available at the particular location. The practise of either turning the screen so that both
staff and client could see the same image or of the staff member inviting the client behind the desk to look over their shoulder, was common among all staff at both locations, although certain individuals noted that they were more or less comfortable with this practise. The role of the computer – as library finding aid and as connection to the internet information resources – is increasingly prominent in public libraries. The argument that libraries can look towards more frequent substitution of computers for people is building. But in these instances, the computer becomes an implicated affiliated object (Suchman, 2005) in the more subjectivist human-mediated information relationship.

Knowledge and learning in the library organization’s cultural context. At each of these locations the reference desk staff reported occasional use of the information policy and procedural binders. At PB, there were often two staff members on the desk at the same time and thus the opportunities for shared learning were built into the desk structure. Although the Library’s Reference and Information Services Guidelines policy document defines the service philosophy, parameters, and guidelines which staff are expected to follow, each desk culture and practises tends to dictate how knowledge and information sharing and learning occurred. When asked about these guidelines, all but one of the staff at both locations recognized the name of the document and knew of its existence but most noted that they “never referred to it”. At PB, the staff noted that “we’ve all given each other permission to ‘butt in’” (PB Librarian2). The knowledge sharing culture of the information desk is constructed both by the explicit direction of the library’s management, but also perhaps more relevant to the staff and their clients, the local culture provides staff with ways of learning that cannot be captured in training workshops or written statements.

Information relationships over time. Tacit knowledge or personal experience is embedded in many of these information interactions, but it was not often visible at the level of the observed interaction. In both locations, after being present on the desk for a number of shifts, the observed staff began to reveal aspects of these relationships to the researcher, spontaneously.

Patron (female) “Can you check this book? About the bar code? I’m a titch obsessive myself ... and I hate having books not returned” says the patron to the library staff member. The staff member scans the bar code and says, “it’s ok” and the patron continues into the collection area with her children. The library staff member then proceeds to tell me this patron’s ‘story’ – “she’s the mother of three autistic boys, and she trains guide dogs in her home, socializing them and she comes in here every week” (SB53).

Patron (male) stands at the desk and says nothing. Librarian turns around to the shelf behind the desk and retrieves the Globe and Mail Books section of the Saturday paper and hands it to him. No words are exchanged. (SB20)

In both of these interactions, there is implicit evidence of prior experience and shared personal knowledge between the patron and the library staff member. In each case, however, the shared knowledge is private and occasionally intimate between the two
individuals. In the second example, a most extreme form of shared knowing is demonstrated – in the absence of words. From the narrowest transactional interpretation of reference, we should ask is this exchange a reference transaction, and then, is it a reference problem in the Dervinian sense of the subjective-objective information problem? I conclude that these instances are not only transactions at that objective unit of analysis but they are also interactions which are suggestive of much richer relational connections between individual patrons and the library staff.

Libraries are places for learning and for gaining access to information and knowledge sharing – they are different from grocery stores and different from internet cafes. These differences are often difficult to name and to capture, but they materialize in the form of library culture and the physical library spaces. Gieryn’s (2000) definition of space includes a cultural aspect of meaning and value: “places are doubly constructed …. They are interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined … and inevitably contested.” The desk space and culture constructed by the staff and by the institution are inseparable to the business of the reference interaction and the longer term information relationships established there.

6. Conclusion

The aspects of the reference process discussed here may appear obvious and familiar to people who regularly work in this desk ecology. They might even elicit the ‘so what?’ question from staff and clients alike. However, they are important to understand and ‘tease out’ in both the research and management contexts because they represent a rich and essential human dimension to the service which so far, has no substitute in the world of information technology. Moreover, the human dimensions need further understanding and analysis to understand more about how the interpersonal and relational dimension of the reference process is at work. And in this sense, this study builds, in part, on Radford’s (1999) original reference work. From a management perspective, the needs are different. Library administrators are constantly reviewing their priorities and services to allocate funds in the most effective means possible while meeting their institutional goals and objectives. Reference desk work has only typically been measured through ‘stick counts’ on annual surveys, aggregated across all branch libraries into one number. But such quantification misses capturing some of these significant dimensions of the reference process – knowledge and knowing are present, knowledge sharing can be more mutual and users often come to their library with prior experience of relationship, regardless of whether or not that particular interaction shows evidence of this relationship in the moment. And in certain settings, evidence suggests that even silence can speak volumes about information and knowledge connections.

References


