

MATERIAL-MIND-METHOD: ON THE TEACHING OF REFERENCE

Once Upon a Time: Storytelling and its Place in the Teaching of Reference

Loriene Roy

School of Information, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

Reference is about story making. Each reference interaction is a lived experience in a moment of time. The moment includes two or more characters, dialog, action, suspense, and resolution. Some reference encounters are now legendary, often for their unique or humorous elements. Take, for example, the story of the student who requested a book titled *Oranges and Peaches* when he was actually assigned to read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (Dewdney & Michell, 1996). Fleeting and evaporating, each story adds to the experiences of the reference provider and also to the satisfaction of the questioner. They provide humility to the art and science of reference and remind us that our work is important at the personal level. In this column I examine the potential of using such stories and narratives in reference classes.

The stories of reference encounters offer valuable case studies that can help illustrate the nature and importance of reference service. Murphy (2005) referred to *reference* as a complex narrative wherein “three texts essentially intersect to form the reference narrative: the patron text, the professional text, and the institutional text” (p. 247). Devine, Quinn, and Aguilar (2014) similarly wrote about two main types of narrative used in library instruction: macro-narratives (folklore, myth, and fables) and micro-narratives (stories created by groups and/or for use in specific environments). Stories about reference are important vehicles for knowledge, but they also carry with them the responsibility of privacy, especially in guarding the privacy of the person who asks the questions. When done with care, however, storytelling can serve several meaningful functions within a reference course.

Storytelling, for me, is not simply an approach to illustrate a point in the classroom. As an indigenous person, I use the act of storytelling to affirm my cultural identity. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith (1999) recognized story telling as a format/method for indigenous-based research. She pointed out both what makes storytelling attractive and how it serves as a tool for learning and teaching: “Intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves” (p. 145). Vizenor, a well-known author from my own reservation, the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, likewise described the importance

of stories: “You can’t understand the world without telling a story. There isn’t any center to the world but story” (Coltelli, 1990-1991, p. 101). I therefore use storytelling in my classes as a way of helping my students to understand the “world” of reference. My personal reference story repertoire blends my experiences as a reference librarian, my observation of reference in the field, and stories others have told me.

Here, I share four stories that I have previously used in classes as examples of key concepts or practices. These vignettes are stories on how to open the reference interview, how to respect a patron’s privacy, how to arrive at a patron’s true question, and how to advocate for quality reference service for patrons of all ages. Each vignette can also be tied to crucial professional documents that guide reference service, such as the documents developed by the Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association. These vignettes are descriptions of real encounters that took place in the pre-Internet age; yet, even now, they allow us to focus on the human interaction and dialog of the reference communication. Let’s tell some stories!

Vignette one: Assessing whether your patron needs assistance

To start, consider the variety of options for opening a conversation with a patron. How do we ask someone if he or she needs help without implying that he or she is helpless? To illustrate that point, I recall an interaction with a young patron who taught me that he knew better than I did if he needed assistance.

In the past, reference desks were located near card catalogs. For those who do not remember, these were exquisite pieces of wooden furniture consisting of stacked drawers, each of which was filled with paper cards that were secured in the drawer by metal rods. One afternoon, while seated at the reference desk, I heard the card catalog drawers being opened quickly and shut quickly. I could not see anyone’s head over the catalog, so I peered around the side and saw a young male patron, possibly around 10 years old, busily searching through the drawers. When I asked him whether he needed help, he replied, “No, thank you. I’m gifted.” His response reminded me that sometimes patrons are self-satisfied and that I can rely on them to approach me, should they want assistance.

Vignette two: Responding in like in respecting privacy

Sometimes patrons who need assistance stay in the periphery of the reference service point. They may approach only to withdraw, and then repeat the cycle.

One night, an adult male patron neared the reference desk, then stepped back when human traffic in the area near the service desk increased. Other patrons waited in a queue, but he stayed on the outside of the line. Finally, he

approached the desk, turned his back to me, and extended his hand backwards to the desk, cupping a small piece of paper in his hand. As I looked down at his hand, I heard him ask in a quiet voice if there was any information on the topic noted on the paper. I saw, written in pencil, on the paper that had been folded to only about a square inch, the letters “vd” in very small font and circled. I followed his lead and did not verbalize the letters and, instead, showed him how to search for “lung disease” in the catalog and where to browse among our medical reference materials. He continued his search on his own.

Several nights later, a woman approached the desk, holding the hand of an adult man on her right and the hand of a young boy on her left. She loudly announced, “I have herpes. What information do you have?” I repeated the search of two nights earlier and this time I, naturally, was quieter than the patron, observing how other patrons in the open public service area monitored the progress of this literature search with curiosity. These cases illustrate how patrons set the tone of the reference encounter and, in both, I was called on to preserve the patron’s privacy along the path to locate information on a sensitive topic.

Vignette three: Do you want fries with that?

Some reference encounters illustrate the need to decipher a patron’s true request.

An adult male patron approached me oneday, asking whether the library had any books about angels. “Angels?” I replied, moving my hands as if I were waving a set of wings. He replied, “Yes.” I probed: “Are you interested in a particular angel?” And he replied, “Angel Clare.” I probed again, “What would you like to know about Angel Clare?” He answered: “I would like to know who his wife was.” We moved toward the reference stacks. Sensing some vague familiarity with the name, Angel Clare, and realizing that we were talking about a male angel or character, I pulled a literary handbook off the shelf. “Let’s see if we see anything about ‘Clare, Angel,’” I said. Immediately, I found an entry and recognized that the wife of Angel Clare was Tess of the d’Urbervilles. At this point, the patron pulled a trivia game card from his pocket. He scratched off a section of the card after answering correctly the question, “Who was the wife of Angel Clare?” and told me that he just won a free serving of French fries from a local fast food chain. I invited him to return for lunch.

Vignette four: Even young boys deserve reference service

Storytelling not only emphasizes what patrons bring to the reference encounter, but also reminds us of how our treatment of their request can lead to—or obstruct—a satisfactory result.

Some years ago, I participated in a research project that brought me to public libraries to examine their collections on energy conservation. I followed the circulation of these materials after public programs were held on free and low-cost methods to save energy. While examining the books in the collection, I noticed that two boys, each approximately 12 years old, were also busy searching in reference titles near me. I observed that both boys were well behaved and clean in their appearance and dress, although one had a bruised face and a very bloodshot eye.

After some time, I could not resist but to ask them what they were looking for. They responded that they were looking for the laws of shooting. I pointed out that there was staff at the library whose job it was to answer questions. The boys informed me that they had asked for help but were told to look for the answer in the books. We then looked together in handbooks and in books on camping and outdoor life. Having no success, I asked the boys whether they knew of a sporting store nearby. They did, and rushed off on their bikes, only to return about 15 minutes later, telling me that they had found the laws posted on the wall of the store located a short distance from the public library. When I asked to see the document, the boys told me that although they had located the laws, they did not have a copy and that the shopkeeper would not give them one. I then gave them my business card, wrote a note on the back for the shopkeeper, and suggested that they return to the store and let the shopkeeper know that we were working together and needed to make a copy of the laws, and would then return the document to the store.

This strategy worked: the boys returned with the laws, we made a copy, and they brought the flyer back. As they left the library for the day, the boys told me the reason why they needed to find the laws. The boy with the bruised face had accidentally shot himself in the eye with a BB gun. His parents could not afford to pay the cost of the doctor's visit, so the doctor had said that he would not charge them—if the boy memorized the laws of shooting and returned to the doctor's office and recited them. Thus, these boys had a valid reference questions in all senses of the word. Their parents and the physician shared the question, but it took the boys' diligence—and a rogue reference librarian—to get them some equitable service.

Summary: We tell stories to share and learn

Storytelling provides the satisfaction of breathing life into a small incident. Stories, when sufficiently masked to protect individuals and/or settings, can

provide a powerful way to reinforce values. They are remembered for their humor and personal touch, and they allow us to examine ourselves, our services, and the communities that we serve: “Learning through stories encourages interaction and active listening, building respect collaboration, mutuality, common ground and healing through understanding” (Devine et al., 2014, p. 286). These four brief stories provide a moral and teaches an important lesson for reference work:

- Do not assume that the patron is helpless.
- The patron will lead you into the parameters of their zone of privacy.
- Patrons may underestimate the ability of the reference librarian to answer specific questions.
- Treat young people’s request for information as you would receive and respond to a request from an adult.

Students, of course, will have numerous takeaways from any story. In their careers, they will also add to the multilayered mosaic of stories that we call reference service.

References

- Coltelli, L. (1990-1991). Gerald Vizenor: The trickster heir of Columbus: An interview. *Native American Literatures: Forum*, 2-3, 101-116.
- Devine, J. R., Quinn, T., & Aguilar, P. (2014). Teaching and transforming through stories: An exploration of macro- and micro-narratives as teaching tools. *The Reference Librarian*, 55(4), 273-288. doi:10.1080/02763877.2014.939537
- Dewdney, P., & Michell, G. (1996). Oranges and peaches: Understanding communication accidents in the reference interview. *RQ*, 35(4), 520-523, 526-536.
- Murphy, S. A. (2005). The reference narrative. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 44(3), 247-252.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London, NY: Zed Books. Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press.

Copyright of Reference Librarian is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.