

Reference: Learning to Dance

By Leanna Jantzi.

Two information specialists challenged the conventional definition and practice of reference work at this year's BC Library Conference, asserting that reference work is not just about answering questions; rather, it is a social interaction.

The Saturday morning session titled: "No Longer Just an Interview – The Practice of Reference and Education Future Practitioners" was filled to capacity as presenters Mary Cavanagh and Luanne Freund discussed the elements of a new brand of reference practice and how it impacts the education of new information professionals.

"Reference service and practice is a social entity," Cavanagh said. "What matters in practice are the people."

The Human Side

Using evidence from her dissertation work, Cavanagh described reference transactions as relationships and the interaction that occurs between the librarian and the library user as a dance.

"Reference service is a very, very human activity," Cavanagh said, adding that in a "world of efficiencies" it's often hard to recognize that human element.

"It's so much more than a stick count," she said.

For her dissertation, Cavanagh gathered data from 480 face-to-face interactions from adult reference services at three branches of a large, urban library. She also conducted interviews with library users and staff. She said that her key question was: how does learning and knowing occur? Cavanagh said what she saw during her study was a much "richer" reference practice from what is reflected in the conventional five-step reference interview and "stick-count" statistics.

"We-mode"

Cavanagh concluded that the dynamics of reference practice includes something she calls the "we-mode" – a mode in which people have a shared goal. The we-mode sees librarians enter into a commitment with a patron and librarians and users

connect through content and through relating. It is the connection through relating that offers the ineluctable human touch and develops relationships, Cavanagh said: "It becomes something bigger than 'do you have this book?'"

Pointing to a model reference behaviours checklist that reminds librarians to smile and maintain eye contact, Cavanagh argued that such behaviours are necessary, but insufficient: "It's not enough of the story." She advised that policy be derived from practices and warned that if policies attempt to streamline the reference relationship too much, "you're going to lose its richness."

LIS Education

Cavanagh's work does not just have implications for current professionals and management. According to Freund, Cavanagh's work also impacts the education of future information professionals.

Freund, an instructor at the University of B.C.'s School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, said information services need to be rethought and the traditional model of reference services must be built upon. Echoing Cavanagh's remarks and touching on the impact of technology on information services, Freund said that the new model "extends beyond the library." The traditional metaphor of the librarian as a gatekeeper has been replaced with the librarian as a guide, Freund explained. The emergence of new technologies means that people can find a lot of information on their own and want "someone to work through it with them."

New information professionals need to be taught problem solving skills and must be flexible, self-directed learners who are egalitarian, communicative, collaborative, social and empathetic, Freund said. They must, she emphasized, learn how to dance.

Redefining Reference

Topics that move beyond cognition and communication, such as digital and social information behaviours should be added to LIS curriculum, Freund suggested. In addition, reference resources need to be redefined and alternative teaching methods including collaboration, problem-

based learning, observation and participation in practice, and community service learning need to be embraced.

Freund touched on how SLAIS's core Information Sources and Services course is starting to reflect some of these ideas and how SLAIS's Reference Squad offers students the opportunity to participate in community service learning. The squad sees SLAIS students offer peer-to-peer term paper consultations and is "very we-mode," Freund said.

In closing, Cavanagh told the crowd that the future of reference is social: "If you want to work in reference you've got to love people."

Cavanagh is a researcher and academic in the areas of libraries and information management with an extensive background in public library work. She holds an MLIS from the University of Western Ontario, a PhD from the University of Toronto and has just been appointed Assistant Professor at University of Ottawa's new School of Information.

Freund does research in the areas of information retrieval and information services and is an assistant professor at SLAIS, UBC. She holds an MLIS from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a PhD from the University of Toronto.

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