Preparing Students to Serve as Liaison Librarians

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Note

This paper has been peer reviewed. It was submitted for publication, reviewed, and revisions made, in preparation for a special issue of *The Reference Librarian*, but ultimately withdrawn over a copyright dispute with the publisher, Taylor & Francis. For the full story of this copyright dispute, see this post on the PomeRantz blog.

Abstract

Liaison librarianship is becoming an increasingly common service model in academic libraries. This paper addresses the question: What is needed to prepare students in Information and Library Science programs to be liaison librarians? A critical review of literature on liaison librarianship and related service models is presented, followed by a description of an assignment designed to give students exposure to the tasks of a liaison librarian. The paper concludes with recommendations for revisions to Reference courses.

Keywords: Liaison librarianship, Embedded librarianship, Subject librarianship, Reference education, Academic libraries

Introduction

Liaison librarianship is becoming an increasingly common service model in academic libraries. Liaison librarian programs are often associated with a library's Reference service, either extending or, less frequently, replacing the existing service model. The libraries at the authors' own institutions, for example, have recently formalized liaison librarian service models in their

main branches. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has had a liaison librarianship program in place in its Health Sciences Library for several years; this program has served a model for the development of the liaison program in the main library. The Duke University libraries have recently redefined and re-visioned its pre-existing subject specialist librarian program, and in its place launched a liaison librarian program.

The domain of reference librarianship is being encroached upon from two separate directions: social Q&A and high-performance computing. Over the past five years or so, many social Q&A sites have been launched: Yahoo! Answers (answers.yahoo.com), the Wikipedia Reference Desk (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reference_desk), Ask MetaFilter (ask.metafilter.com), Quora (quora.com), Aardvark (vark.com), to name only a few of the more popular. It is even more difficult to estimate the number of questions answered by these services, than it is to estimate the number of questions answered by library reference services. . . but it seems obvious that social Q&A services answer many times more questions than library reference services. On the other flank, we have systems that are the product of decades of research and development in question answering systems: START (start.csail.mit.edu), AnswerBus (answerbus.com), Wolfram|Alpha (wolframalpha.com), again to name only a few. The conceptual descendant of these systems, IBM's Watson (www-03.ibm.com/innovation/us/watson/), recently won against two human contestants on the show Jeopardy!, thus establishing it (at least for the moment) as the most successful automated question-answering system to date. Others will surely follow.

The extent to which social Q&A services, Watson-like QA systems, and library reference services overlap in the "marketplace" of question answering, is a matter for debate. The fact remains, however, that all three such services must co-exist online. The simple fact that these other services exist online changes the value of library reference work. In the face of social and automated question answering, the value of library reference work lies in the depth of service that an individual librarian can provide. This is, at least in part, behind the rise of liaison librarianship.

Reference work is, however, one of the core areas of library education in most library school curricula. Given that liaison programs are becoming increasingly valuable service offerings for libraries, it seems clear that students must be trained to perform the work of liaison librarians. This paper addresses this question: What is needed to prepare students in Information and Library Science programs to be liaison librarians?

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, a critical review of the existing literature on liaison librarianship and related service models in academic libraries is presented. The purpose of this review is to identify the skillsets and competencies that are necessary for a liaison librarian to possess, in order to identify what must be taught in Information and Library Science programs to prepare graduates to fill liaison librarian positions. Next, an assignment is discussed that one of the authors uses in his introductory Reference course, to give students some exposure to the tasks of a liaison librarian. Finally, this paper ends with recommendations for revisions to Reference courses, to better prepare graduates for liaison librarian positions.

Background on Liaison Librarianship

The ideas behind liaison librarianship are not new. The literature on liaison librarianship, however, is new, with the bulk of published articles having appeared in the past four years. This recency may account for the fact that there seems to be little agreement on terminology: while some academic libraries favor the term "liaison librarianship" for their service offerings, the published literature seems to favor the term "embedded librarianship." Indeed, there have been no fewer than three special issues on embedded librarianship published (Research Library Issues 265, Information Outlook 14(1), and a two-part special issue of Public Services Quarterly 6(2-3)), as well as two blogs, both named Embedded Librarian (embeddedlibrarian.blogspot.com and embeddedlibrarian.wordpress.com). At some academic libraries, the term "subject librarian," or "subject specialist" is also used to refer to librarians who serve an academic department or program. It is interesting to speculate on why the role is identified by different terms. It may be that the varying labels describe a continuum of services

that librarians can provide, from less engaged to more engaged. For our current purposes, liaison, subject, and embedded librarianship will be considered to be identical, and we will focus on identifying the skills and competencies that have been identified in the literature as necessary for such librarians to possess.

Rapid changes in the academy and the information landscape have prompted new attention to the role of the liaison librarian, particularly in ARL libraries. In 2009, ARL published a special issue of Research Library Issues focused on liaison librarian roles. As issue editor Karla Hahn notes, "Many believe that liaison librarian functions are becoming more central to fulfilling the library's mission in a digital age. While research libraries may agree on the importance of the position, how to reconfigure liaison work has become a topic of broad concern. Identifying emerging roles and determining how to develop corresponding liaison capabilities are common challenges." The University of Minnesota and Duke University, among others, have launched projects to redefine and re-vision the role of the liaison librarian in light of changing patterns of research and teaching.

As already stated, the ideas behind liaison librarianship are not new. Whatley (2009) makes this case most strongly, when she states that her responsibilities as a liaison librarian are divided into the "holy trinity": reference, instruction, and collection development (p.30). Many other authors make essentially the same case, that these three fairly traditional functions of librarians form the cornerstone of liaison librarianship (Bean & Thomas, 2010; Berdish & Seeman, 2009; Dupuis, 2009; Gabridge, 2009; Martin, 2010; Matos, Matsuoka-Motley, & Mayer, 2010). Other traditional functions that have been discussed as tasks that liaison librarians take on include program development (Gabridge, 2009) and course-embedded instruction (Garson & McGowan, 2010; Shumaker & Talley, 2010). However, research libraries in particular are identifying additional responsibilities for librarians. Working with faculty and students to help them understand the evolving scholarly communication landscape, helping develop research data management plans, and training users in the use of digital tools (e.g., ARL statistics analytics, arlstatistics.org) could be seen as extensions of reference, instruction and collection development, or as new responsibilities that liaison librarians need to take on.

Readers of this special issue know full well that academic librarianship is in a period of dramatic change. Part of this change involves new roles emerging as critical to librarianship. Many of these roles have also been identified in the literature as important for liaison librarians. Evaluation and accountability have become increasingly important to academic libraries' host institutions, and assessment has emerged as a task for liaison librarians (Dupuis, 2009; McMillen & Fabbi, 2010; Muir & Heller-Ross, 2010; Weaver & Pier, 2010). As scholars are increasingly required by funding agencies to make their work available online, sometimes in open access venues, and to share their datasets, data curation (Gabridge, 2009) and implementation of institutional repositories (Gibson & Coniglio, 2010; Kirchner, 2009) have emerged as tasks for liaison librarians. These tasks often require close relationships with specific academic units (thus leading to the "embedded" moniker); some liaison librarians hold office hours in the academic department with which they are affiliated (Bartnik et al, 2010; Drewes & Hoffman, 2010; Olivares, 2010; Matava, Coffey & Kushkowski, 2010), and even attend faculty meetings (Heider, 2010).

Interestingly, one of the most widely-discussed tasks that liaison librarians take on is marketing, both of the library itself and of the services provided by the library (Bartnik et al, 2010; Covone & Lamm, 2010; Gibson & Coniglio, 2010; Heider, 2010; Olivares, 2010; Martin, 2010; Matava, Coffey & Kushkowski, 2010; Ramirose & Finnell, 2009). In part, this may be due to the role of the liaison librarian being a new one on college and university campuses, and the need, therefore, to explain, define, and develop the role of the liaison librarian to the library user community (McMillen & Fabbi, 2010).

Few of the skills that are necessary for liaison librarians, given the responsibilities and tasks discussed above, are unique to this form of librarianship. Many of these skills are likely to appear in a job posting for any library position: provide instruction, act as a library representative, work with faculty. et cetera. Furthermore, many of these skills are likely to appear in a job posting for any position in any organization: communication and presentation skills, project management skills, marketing skills, technical knowledge.

This therefore begs the question: Are any of the skills necessary for liaison librarians to possess, unique to liaison librarians? The authors suggest that the answer to this question is No. The skills necessary for performing liaison librarianship are already present in library school curricula. Far from being a criticism of liaison librarianship, however, the authors suggest that this is a significant positive. As anyone who has ever been involved in the process knows, curriculum redesign is a time-consuming and complicated process. The fact that material need not necessarily be added or removed from existing library school curricula, but simply rearranged, may considerably ease the task.

The skills necessary for liaison librarians to possess already exist in library school curricula, but spread out across multiple courses. These skills appear in courses on reference, collection development, user instruction, management, and several other courses, both those that may be required core courses and those that are more likely to be electives. In order for library science programs to prepare students to become liaison librarians, modifications to existing curricula will be necessary, across a range of courses. The next section, however, will take a narrower focus, presenting an assignment that one of the authors used in an introductory Reference course. This assignment was designed to require students to exercise some of the skills necessary for liaison librarians to possess, but only those skills that are most closely associated with "traditional" Reference work.

Liaison Librarianship Assignment

As discussed above, many of the tasks of the liaison librarian require close relationships with academic units. Part of developing such close relationships involves in-depth and ongoing collaborations with faculty and other members of research teams on campus. A librarian's presence in an academic unit can go some way to building that connection. But that relationship is also built from both outreach to the user community, and in-depth consultations and research support over the long term.

This assignment, given to the students in the author's Reference courses, was designed to require students to experience both. The assignment requires students to take on the role of a liaison librarian by working with a client--a faculty member or Ph.D. student, in Library & Information Science or another field in which the student has expertise--over the course of most of the semester. See Appendix A for the full text of the assignment description.

On the instructor's side, arranging this assignment was fairly labor-intensive. Several weeks prior to the start of the semester, the author emailed all of his faculty colleagues and Ph.D. students in his school, to ask if any of them had a project that might be appropriate for this assignment. Such projects had to fulfill several requirements: (1) it should be reasonably small-scale, (2) could benefit from student labor, and (3) should not be time-critical. The author laid out these requirements in order to attempt to keep the scope of the work that students would be asked to do contained. It should not come as a surprise that the response by potential clients to this solicitation was fairly deafening. The response was far greater than the author had anticipated. . . perhaps naïvely. As a result, the author asked potential clients to write a brief abstract about the work that they would ask students to do. Once the semester began, students could then choose which client they wished to consult. The author then introduced the student to the client by email, and left it to them to coordinate the details of the consultation--though the author of course offered to step in to assist with any issues or questions that might arise. Most clients were faculty and Ph.D. students in SILS, but a few students found their own clients outside of SILS.

The next time the author uses this assignment, he will seek out more clients from outside his school. As stated in the assignment description, the reason for clients being within the authors School was to ensure that Master's students had at least a minimal level of subject expertise in their client's area. As it turned out, however, that pre-existing subject expertise led to a missed opportunity for the development of additional subject expertise. Many Master's students knew right away, after their initial meeting with their client, which databases, journals, and websites might be relevant to their client's information need. Having students work with clients outside of their area would have made the assignment more challenging for them, but would also have

required students to learn about resources in a new domain. Given the requirement of subject expertise for many liaison librarians, this would be a valuable addition to this assignment.

The next time the author uses this assignment, he will restrict the clients to faculty members only. This is not to denigrate the validity of Ph.D. student information needs, but as it turned out, Ph.D. students were less able to effectively interact with the Master's students working on this assignment. Again, perhaps the author was naïve going into this assignment: Ph.D. students are of course more used to being the free labor working on a project, than the client for whom a project is being done. As it turned out, most Ph.D. student clients had the Master's students conduct literature reviews for them, but were unwilling or unable to involve the Master's student more closely in the conceptualization of the project as a whole. In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that faculty clients were better able to integrate the Master's students into the larger research process: faculty have rather more experience with doing this.

The instructional value of this assignment was twofold. First, as one student wrote in her assignment report, this assignment required students "to sustain a long-term commitment" to another's information need. This commitment involved not merely embarking on a long-term research project--something which graduate students are well used to doing--but conducting this project iteratively: students conducted an initial meeting with their clients, found some resources, met with their clients again or exchanged email, received feedback from their clients, et cetera, through several rounds. Second, this assignment required students to practice techniques for conducting reference interactions. This is of course one of the most important skills addressed in Reference courses. But it is also one of the most difficult skills to teach; these types of interaction skills are far more effectively learned by doing. As another student wrote in her assignment report, "I felt like this assignment was as close as a classroom assignment could get to real-world professional experience."

Need for a Revision to Reference Curricula

The great irony of Reference courses is that the practice of reference work is best learned by doing, but it is precisely the experience of actually doing reference work that is most difficult for instructors to provide to their students. Few Directors of Reference departments would put a student in an introductory Reference course on the desk, let alone 30-90 students. Therefore, other venues must take on the role of providing students with a realistic experience of the reference interaction.

Some instructors devote class sessions to reference interview role-playing. This is a valuable exercise: skill in improv is not to be discounted in reference work. Role-playing, however, requires either that students come to class with a prepared question, or that the instructor provide students with an imposed query, to ask of a classmate. In either case, role-playing is not a realistic analog for the reference interaction. The fact is, there is no substitute for a reference interaction. The only way to give students experience of actual interactions with users is to give students experience of actual interactions with users.

The authors suggest that a dramatic revision to the Reference course that is core to most library science curricula is overdue. The author suggests that the core Reference course has bifurcated. On the one hand, "traditional" reference interactions--that is, one-off walk-up questions--are largely being addressed by social Q&A sites, such as Yahoo! Answers. A discussion of this topic is far too large for this article, and work is currently being done to bridge the gap between library reference services and social Q&A sites (e.g., Shah, 2011; Shah & Pomerantz, 2010). On the other hand, longer-term research consultations are becoming more common, thus providing an increasingly large niche that is being filled by liaison librarianship programs.

The authors suggest further that a dramatic revision to the core curricula of most library science programs is overdue, in order to prepare students to become liaison librarians. Stripping away the "traditional" one-off reference interaction and longer-term research consultations from existing Reference courses leaves a set of skills around information seeking and evaluation, and information needs assessment--a set of skills that are central to all

information professions. The authors suggest reconceptualizing the core Reference course as a core Information Seeking and Evaluation course, and then expanding the material on research consultations in the elective courses on the variety of environments and contexts in which information needs arise. Many library science programs already have courses on various forms of subject librarianship (e.g., health sciences librarianship, health informatics, humanities and social sciences librarianship, music librarianship, etc.). These courses are the more appropriate home for the skills necessary to perform the work of liaison librarianship in the range of contexts.

Again, the skills required by liaison librarians--by reference librarians generally--have not fundamentally changed. Skill in information seeking and evaluation, and in interpersonal interactions are as important in these arenas as ever. What has changed, however, are the contexts in which these skills play out, both in library-based services and outside of libraries. It behooves library educators to provide assignments to students that more realistically reflects the environment in which our graduates will find themselves. Not the environment in which our graduates will find themselves in five years, but the environment that exists now, today.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Sarah Dooley for assistance with the literature review.

Appendix A

One of the most important developments in recent years in the services offered by academic libraries is the rise of the liaison librarian. Rodwell & Fairbairn suggest that "university libraries are seeking to embed their activities within academic programs, rather than just supporting or aligning with them," and that part of this embedding involves conducting reference-like work with and for individuals in academic programs. These close ties to academic programs naturally require subject expertise in these academic areas.

For this assignment, you will perform reference work in a style similar to that performed by a liaison librarian: that is, at a high level of subject expertise. You will serve as an information intermediary for a "client." These clients are free to ask you to fulfill any information need they like. . . as in real life. Your task is to provide service at level two or greater, as articulated by Ferree, et al. In other words, you will conduct searches, identify and evaluate resources, deliver resources, provide bibliographic instruction, set up alert services, whatever it takes, for your client.

Working individually or in pairs, you will consult with a UNC faculty member or Ph.D. student, on a topic related to their work. This faculty member or Ph.D. student may be in SILS--because you are in a Library & Information Science program, you have at least a little expertise in Library & Information Science to bring to bear. If you have some depth of expertise in another field (a second Master's degree, professional experience, etc.), and you would rather work with a faculty member or Ph.D. student in that field, I will be happy to work with you to make such a contact. However, if you do this assignment in pairs, both students need to have at least a passable level of expertise in the field in question.

You should meet with your client as early as possible to conduct an initial interview and needs assessment. Then go and do work on your own. Then you should meet again with your client to present some initial work, and get their feedback. When I took a course on information retrieval as a grad student, the professor said that there were two laws of IR: (1) TF-IDF, and (2) Relevance feedback works. Point #1 is probably not relevant in this context. Point #2 means that an IR tool that solicits the user's input, on the relevance of resources retrieved in a search, can retrieve more relevant resources on the next search. I would argue that this is a law of information work more generally.

In order that this consulting does not turn into a full-time job, you should limit the time you spend on this work to 40 hours. You will have several weeks to work on this assignment.

Grading

You will have two deliverables for this assignment: one to your client, and one to me. What you will deliver to your client is open to negotiation between you and your client. Submit your deliverable to your client before you submit your deliverable to me.

What you will deliver to me is a brief report in which you describe the process of interviewing and negotiating with your client and eliciting your client's information needs, seeking and evaluating information and sources, any ongoing discussions with your client, the process of creating your deliverable to your client, and anything else involved in your work for your client. The work that you negotiate with your client will be different for every client and every project, so it's impossible to specify here exactly what you should include in your report.

As an appendix to your report to me, append a copy of what you deliver to your client--unless your client is unwilling to share it, for whatever reason. I will also speak with all of your clients at the end of the semester, to elicit their perspective on your ability to elicit their information needs.

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