A Better Reference Evaluation Survey

Mira Foster, Senior Assistant Librarian, San Francisco State University

Most reference service evaluation focuses on patron impressions of reference service shortly after their encounters. Many of the recent assessment instruments and discussions have focused on measuring the value and effectiveness of virtual reference service and describing the complexity of reference questions (McLaughlin, 2011). In most cases they suppose a semi-anonymous exchange between a service provider and patron. However, librarian educators in academic libraries provide customized research assistance as an extension of instruction.

The California State University system uses a modified Warner model (2001) for classifying reference statistics by focusing on the level of skill and the strategies used. This is helpful in considering library staffing, but it does not measure the relationship between library instruction and research assistance or the quality of research support offered by librarians. This evaluation survey provides qualitative data and description of subject specific support, including specialized research assistance received from multiple encounters with a librarian.

Increasingly, academic reference and instruction librarians develop relationships with students that begin in instruction sessions and extend through the duration of research projects. Library instruction increases reference traffic (Saunders, 2001), and likely increases student demand for follow-up consultations with librarians familiar with their courses, assignments, and particular research needs.

Carol Kuhlthau's model of the *Information Search Process* (2007) includes 7 stages, including a final assessment stage where students reflect on their whole research process and consider what they've learned, what problems they encountered during the process, and what they would do differently in the future. This survey provides an opportunity for students to assess themselves and their experience formally in questions 3 and 6. In addition, because the survey is NOT anonymous, the librarian can compare their memory of the encounters with what students found most useful, and can quote the tangible advice in workshops for future students with the same assignment.

Survey Questions (see survey handout for full details)
1. How did you learn about this research assistance service? (Multiple choice)
2. Which statements best describe the nature of your research consultation?
3. Which statements describe what you learned from your research consultation?
4. By which methods did you communicate (IM, email, etc)?
5. Which aspects of library research did you discuss?
   (Lists typical strategies and topics covered during interviews)
6. What advice or information related to your research assignment do you wish someone had given you sooner? (Open question)
7. What was helpful about your research consultation? (Open question)
8. What would have been more helpful? What could be improved? (Open question)

References

- Kuhlthau, C. C. (2007). *Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century*. Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited.
- McLaughlin, J. E. (2011). Reference transaction assessment: Survey of a multiple perspectives approach, 2001 to 2010. *Reference Services Review*, *39*(4), 536–550.
- Saunders, E. S. (2003). The Effect of Bibliographic Instruction on the Demand For Reference Services. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, *3*(1), 35–39.
- Warner, D. G. (2001). A new classification for reference statistics. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *41*(1), 51–55.