The Roving Librarian

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[Bradford W. Dennis came to WMU in mid-2002 as "one of our own" since he had earned his B.A. in History, cum laude, in 1990 from WMU along with a Michigan Provisional Teaching Certificate. In the next decade, he gained a breadth of experiences in college and secondary teaching, Waldo Library reference, the Libraries' Special Collections, and, after 1994, as a reference librarian at the Kent District Library in Wyoming MI. By 2000, he had also completed the Library and Information Science master's program offered by Wayne State University while honing his skills as a computer and media services expert. As Education Librarian, he is now the liaison with the departments of Educational Studies: Health, Physical Education and Recreation; and Teaching, Learning and Leadership, and provides reference service to all users of the Education Library.]

What do you do when you need help finding something in big room or building full of merchandise? Do you wander aimlessly about looking for signs that will give you some clues as to location of particular items? Do you look for someone to help you or try to find an information kiosk or courtesy desk? Do you frequent places that provide excellent customer service or places that make help readily available by "roving" personnel who walk around the establishment asking "Are you finding what you need?"

My own choice of help varies. When shopping for home improvement supplies, I normally frequent hardware stores that provide knowledgeable staff walking around the store answering home improvement questions. However, when shopping for clothing or other apparel, once I find the men's clothing section, I prefer to be left alone until I have looked around, examined some choices, and have a specific question—perhaps about colors or sizes. I will then look for an associate who will be able to answer my question. At the same time, if someone were to ask me a slightly different kind of question, "Are you finding what you need?"—without intruding— I would be pleased to know whom to ask if I do have questions in the future.

But in these instances, I'm talking about matching a specific product to a specific need or interest. When asking the same question of a service provider such as a librarian, information, or media specialist, a different set of factors comes into play. Libraries are not marketing a manufactured product such as a new car or type of food. They are providing a special service to users who are searching for information or answers to particular questions. Regardless, what kind of and how much service is needed to "help the patron" is not clear in many libraries and information centers of the 21st century. The bottom line questions include:

- Do library patrons prefer to be "left alone" until they have a question?
- Would users appreciate a librarian "roving" throughout the library asking, "Are you finding what you need?"
- Would patrons visit the library more often if they knew a "roving reference" librarian would be available to help them?

To answer these and related questions, I began, in the summer of 2003, to design and implement a research study to be conducted in the WMU Libraries.

The Study

In order to serve the students, faculty, and staff of the University more effectively, we need to learn more about the types of service that users prefer. More specifically, the proposed research study involved a type of proactive user service called "roving reference." The idea behind roving reference is that the librarian walks around the library and asks students or faculty "if they are finding what they need," rather than waiting for them to approach the reference desk with a question. The data that are being compiled from this survey should indicate where users prefer reference service provided, i.e., at a reference desk, e-mail, chat reference (an interactive, online service), or by a librarian who approaches the user and assists the user where he or she is working within the library. The data, when analyzed, should tell us if any library users find roving librarians intrusive, bothersome, or not helpful in any way. We should also learn if users prefer librarians to "rove" within particular locations, as, for example, only in areas close to a reference desk or, more widespread, such as where pods of terminals are located throughout the building or area.

The study was conducted during one week periods in the Fall 2003 semester and the Spring 2004 semester when a survey was individually administered to a sample of 713 WMU undergraduate and graduate students, staff, and faculty participants. I attempted to obtain a universal sample by handing out surveys to every individual working in the Libraries (excluding the Libraries' faculty, staff, and custodians) within a given time period. Various users at different locations in Waldo Library, the Education Library, the Music and Dance Library, the Archives and Regional History Collections, and the Visual Resources Library were surveyed using a Human Subjects Institutional Research Board approved questionnaire. The survey consisted of sixteen questions that asked demographic information and information about the participants' reference service preferences. Five hundred surveys were returned of the 713 given out, thus achieving a return rate of 70.12%. At the present time, I am using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to analyze the data and determine the correlation among variables.

Hypotheses & Probable Conclusions

The literature indicates that there are good reasons why roving reference should be an integral part of any proactive reference service provided to a group of library users. Roving reference: 

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- is user or person-centered not desk or place oriented;
- increases the number, quality, and sophistication of questions asked since a search is already in progress that is not working;
- provides us with an opportunity to teach or instruct customers at the point of need;
- allows us to monitor how resources are used from the unique perspective of the user; and
- shows librarians as available, approachable, and helpful.

We know from current studies and older studies dating back to the 1970s that about 40% of the customers in any library have a question, but are unwilling to ask for assistance. Part of this reluctance to ask a question has to do with customers not wanting to interrupt a librarian who looks busy and/or unapproachable, or is hidden behind a desk in a spotlighted area. Others feel that their question is “too simple, obvious, or otherwise not worthy” of an answer. Some, sad to say, have had bad experiences with librarians in the past. Moreover, some users simply don’t know how to ask the question and don’t want to appear dumb. The bottom line is that walking up to most service points in libraries takes more than a modicum of assertive behavior.

From experience, I have readily observed that students and other users generally “love it” when librarians walk around and help them at the point of need. In fact, after answering one person’s question, it is often the case that several others ask for help because you have just physically demonstrated that you are interested in helping them find what they are seeking. Even if a person does not need assistance at the time, you have just broken the “body language barrier” and identified yourself as a helpful librarian. This person will seek you out if he/she has a question later. As studies have shown, many users relate best to someone of their own sex, cultural appearance, age, and other factors that are perceived as welcoming. However, when the librarian of any age or appearance comes to you, most users are open to asking for help.

The bottom line is that roving reference could be a powerful means by which to improve the image of the library itself. Roving reference should break down the old (and new) stereotype of the unfriendly, desk-bound librarian who is more interested in keeping the library quiet than in assisting the users. Roving reference also provides an opportunity to discover what types of problems students and other users are having. Studies have also shown that by the time a question reaches the reference desk, it is, more often than not, only a directional or local question. If we ask, “Are you finding what you need?” earlier in the search process, we may be able to help our customers with a more difficult question and, in turn, create more value in our service. We also discover if the Libraries’ Web pages are as clear as we thought they might be, and if our site language is helpful or confusing as the user navigates our home pages.

Roving has been shown to be a highly productive technique that can also be applied to the classroom. Much of our bibliographic instruction is taught to multiple students during a single, introductory session. I normally conduct an interactive presentation in which library tools such as the library catalog and a journal index are introduced and then the students practice what they have just learned. Typical sessions are between one half hour to one hour and fifteen minutes depending on the class. Because of this time limitation, interactive, individual feedback is not always possible with every student.

However, I have taught many two to three hour research methods courses in which the instructor and I help students begin research on their topic after the presentation. The instructor and I “rove” around the classroom and help students individually. This is extremely productive and the students learn how to conduct research at the point of need. This is very similar to a roving reference transaction because the motivation to learn how to conduct research and how to use the information is present. That is why librarians at Western Michigan University highly recommend that the instruction occur in coordination with an assignment. There is then a reason for the student to put the instruction to practice.

As thousands of students and other users access our University Libraries, we want to ensure that our “wealth of resources” isn’t lost to those who enter our physical and electronic doors. “Where is it?” needs to become an historical phrase as our library faculty and staff reach out physically and intellectually to patrons far from our service desks. Our motto for the future may well be “To rove is to respond; to reach out is to serve.”

WMU Digitization Center
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- Historical materials for the Niles library centennial celebration (Niles District Library);
- A large regional obituary collection covering a five county area (Van Buren District Library, Decatur);
- A regional history photography collection (Cass District Library, Cassopolis);
- Selections from a late 19th century newspaper (Thornapple Kellogg School and Community Library, Middleville);
- A collection of aerial photographs of west Michigan (Portage District Library); and
- The history of a paper industry “company town” (Parchment Community Library).

In addition, as noted earlier, the Digitization Center is also intended as a special service to support research at the University. The Ward Morgan Photograph Collection that was described in the last issue of Gatherings is being digitized for The Making of Modern Michigan (MMM). Many of its 26,000 images are being scanned through the Regional Digitization Center. Newly added to the collections that will be available in the online image database are parts of the Caroline Bartlett Crane collection, a notable woman activist of the 1800s, from the WMU Archives and Regional History Collections. In addition, the Special Collections department of the University Libraries is making high resolution digital files of rare books useful for research. The initiative includes a book from 1567 and one in which the first printing of Old English appears. This effort will initiate a long-term collaborative project contributing to research in Medieval Studies.

In brief, the WMU Regional Digitization Center is organized to serve two major purposes: the University’s research mission and The Making of Modern Michigan. The digitized collections are scheduled to be available online beginning in the summer of this year, 2004. Further information can be provided by the Manager of the Digitization Center, Lou Ann Morgan, at 269 387-5093. Key Web sites for the digitization projects are:

- Equipment/systems list: http://www.wmich.edu/library/digi/equip/