Do crabs have favorite colors?

Susan R. Gilmont
Oregon State University Libraries

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/olaq
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons


© 2014 by the author(s).
OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374 | http://commons.pacificu.edu/olaq
"O ver the past quarter of a century, vast num-

bers of support staff have been pressed into 

service ... at reference desks across the 

country ... What remains to be debated and resolved, 

in my opinion, is not whether paraprofessionals 

should or should not be used at the reference 
desk—the troops have voted with their feet on that 
one—but rather how they may best be utilized and 

what can be done to assure the conditions necessary 

for their success." — Larry R. Oberg

With these words, Larry Oberg raises a clear chal-

lenge to all of us who care about the role of 

paraprofessionals at the reference desk. I'd like to 

talk about my experiences doing reference work at a 

small, specialized academic library. I believe that 

staff members at small libraries grow in ways that 

their peers at larger institutions do not simply 

because they have nobody to fall back on. 

My experiences describe one approach to using 

paraprofessionals, and I hope these observations 

will be useful to others.

**Background**

I'd like to begin by explaining my situation. I'm a 

library technician III at the Guin Library at the 

Hatfield Marine Science Center on the central Oregon 

cost. The Guin Library is Oregon State University's 

only branch library. The main and branch libraries 

are 56 miles apart, a degree of separation common 

for marine libraries. Our library is small but active. 

We have 2.5 FTE permanent staff and about .5 FTE 

student workers. Our collection is small, around 

28,000 volumes with about 300 active serial sub-

scriptions. The Guin Library serves Oregon State 

University staff and students, federal and state agen-

cies located at the center, and the nearby Oregon 

Coast Aquarium. Our core constituency is diverse 

but primarily concerned with marine science issues.

I came to the Guin Library seven years ago, after 

more than nine years of experience in the serials 
department at our main library, the William Jasper 

Kerr Library in Corvallis. I'm the interlibrary loan 

clerk, the serials control clerk and the binding clerk. 

I assist in supervising circulation and shelving. 

Before we added a half-time technician, I also did 

the accounting and resource sharing with our main 

library. I have always had plenty to do without help-

ing with reference, but I found myself doing it.

**The Trials**

At first, I only dealt with reference questions when 

the librarian was gone. And she was gone a lot. Dur-

ing the first six months, she was gone for six weeks. 

As the only other staff person, I was responsible for 

keeping things going in her absence. I was unaware 

that she was nearing the end of a period of remis-

sion from cancer and was packing the experiences 
of a lifetime into the time she had left. After my first 
six months, we picked up a temporary half-time 

librarian, which was a blessing because the cancer 
came back, and the librarian died that year. In so 

small a department so great a loss had a huge impact. 

My first eighteen months on the job were a 
difficult and painful time. Despite it all, I would not 

trade that time, because I count myself lucky to have 

worked with a great librarian and an extraordinary 

human being.

Needless to say, I never attended a formal training 

session on reference. I believe this is called the 

throw-her-in-and-see-if-she-floats theory of orienta-

tion. We reviewed what happened during the librar-

ian's absence, so at least I got the benefit of 

hindsight. One of the few disadvantages I can think 
of to working in a small library is that the learning 
environment is not rich. In a large department, infor-

mation is exchanged all the time: It's almost a back-

ground noise. You model, you pick up things from 
your peers. But I didn't have any peers, and because 
the librarian was gone so much, the one-on-one 
attention that normally would have made up for 
environmental deficiencies was often unavailable. I 
did learn, but the process was slower than it would 
have been with training.

One thing I needed to learn about was the referral. 

A major objection to using support staff at the refer-

cence desk is the complaint that "paraprofessionals 

often do not make referrals or do not recognize 

when to make referrals to a professional. ... Other 

librarians believe that paraprofessionals can be so 

eager to help that they will not refer to or consult 

with a librarian." (McDaniel, 1993) I want to be hon-

est now and say that I did these things. I have to 

admit that I did spend hours I couldn't really spare 

trying to answer questions I probably should not 

have tackled. I was untrained, alone, and desperate 
to prove myself. Just as I had to learn to identify the 

best tool to use in answering a question, I had to 

learn how to identify the best person to answer it. 

Another way I overcompensated in those early days 

was to drown the patron in information, out of a 

need to prove I could do the work. As I gained 

familiarity with the collection, learned to use our 

library's reference tools, and experienced success in 

helping patrons, my insecurity diminished, and so 

did the overkill. I got better at conducting reference 

interviews and at identifying librarians and research-

ers to refer appropriate questions to. I came to 

see that placing a good referral was as much a 

mark of my professionalism as answering the ques-

tion myself.

I suspect that many people starting reference work 

experience the anxiety and insecurity that I felt. I 

was seeking what some psychologists call "self-effic-

cacy," a belief in my ability to perform a specific 
task, in this case, frontline reference service. If
supervising librarians want to minimize these natural overcompensatory behaviors in support staff, then I believe they should provide systematic feedback to paraprofessionals, and create a work environment rich in learning resources such as orientation programs, desk manuals, and subject-oriented workshops.

**MATURING**

In speaking honestly about how my performance at the reference desk suffered from a lack of training, I don't want to imply that I came to the desk with empty hands. I had college credits in geology and botany and other coursework in invertebrate zoology. I had collected fossils for fifteen years, and been a birder for almost as long. My personal library contains many of the standard works on the natural history and history of the region. And I had nine years of invaluable experience at our main library. I was familiar with the workflow and the personnel there and could provide better general service because I was cross-trained in the work of many departments.

The review process has helped me feel better about my performance. A review is not the best way to initiate training, but it works in a small library after the staff is trained. To this day, the librarian is often gone one or two days a week, and we have to work at keeping each other up-to-date. When the librarian is absent for extended periods, I keep a running FYI file in my computer. I consult with her, telling her what happened during her absence, and she makes recommendations on how to handle ongoing situations. We meet once a week for team meetings at which we share information. An advantage to working in a small library is that the staff gets more one-on-one interaction with the librarian, and in a one-librarian library, you don't worry about getting mixed signals from different supervisors.

Another factor that helped me mature as a worker was the environment. My supervisors were remarkably patient with me as I learned, and they set great examples of a high standard of service. When I was one member of a crowded department at the main library, I didn't really know what librarians did or what was expected of them. In my current position, I've been fortunate to work under two remarkable librarians. The closer I've gotten, the more my respect has grown. I can't help thinking that some of the distance between the two classes of employees is unnecessary and detrimental. Possible ways to narrow the gap between paraprofessionals and librarians include serving together on committees, working together in a team setting, and pairing at the reference desk.

**EXPERIENCES**

The librarian is often gone attending meetings, so there are many times when I am the senior staff person, or indeed the only staff person on hand to help patrons. Remote assistance is available from our main library, but I still have a lot of responsibility. If a person has driven 150 miles to use our collection,

Susan R. Gilmont

I can't say "I'm sorry, but the librarian is gone." I must try to help that person. My most memorable experiences in reference have taken place when I was alone and in charge of the library. An incident that stands out in memory occurred when I helped a retired librarian who had missed the computer revolution. She was taking a class at a community college in a nearby county and drove to our library for help on a paper about earthquakes and tsunamis. I showed her how to use the CD-ROM databases, and she enjoyed exploring our library's resources. When she left, she asked whether I could give her something with our library's name on it, and I offered her the librarian's card. I felt good about the transaction, because I thought I had been able to slow myself to her pace and that I had empathized with her and shared in her pleasure as she mastered the new technology. But I was astonished the next week when a fifty-dollar check for the friends of our library came in the mail from her.

The most common ready-reference questions in our library concern the tides and the weather. The most often asked reference questions are about whales and dolphins, but other creatures get their share of questions, too. One such question came from a business gearing up to manufacture miniature crabpots designed to be cast from fishing poles. The crabpots were made of molded plastic that could have colored dyes injected into it, and the manufacturer wanted to know whether one color was more appealing to crabs than another. A review of the literature revealed that while crabs do have sophisticated vision, and do seem to see in color, foraging behavior of crabs revealed that, "No, feeding crabs do not have favorite colors."

See Crabs page 18
conference was carried forward by a dedicated group of nine LSSRT members. The first annual LSSRT conference was held in July 1995 with a total attendance of 275. Since LSSRT’s official membership base at that time was 65, we knew there was an untapped resource of library support staffers. The conference evaluations were glowing with comments ranging from, “I enjoyed this conference so much that I plan to join OLA. I now feel I have a part in the organization,” to “It was great to meet so many people from the public and academic libraries and learn of their situations.”

From this experience, we learned that if you give people what they need, want, and can afford, they will attend. Even with holding registration fees down to $40 we demonstrated we could create a cash reserve for future LSSRT conferences and activities.

Under Ainslie’s tenure, LSSRT began the tradition of sponsoring Soaring to Excellence teleconferences at different sites around the state. LSSRT charged a small fee to those attending and thus placed a little more money into its account toward future continuing education opportunities for support staff.

Cook became LSSRT chair in 1995. In 1996, Katherine Stevens became chair of LSSRT, assisted by Maresa Kirk, chair-elect. They are working hard to prepare for the third annual LSSRT conference on July 18, 1997.

LSSRT has benefited from OLA’s support and from the support of the library directors who have encouraged each of the LSSRT officers, both past and present. We would like to acknowledge these directors who assisted us with our vision: Melvin George (retired), OSU; Jim Scheppke, the State Library of Oregon; Carole Dickerson, Lake Oswego Public Library; Sue Burkholder, SOSR; Barbara Swanson, PCC; and Larry Oberg, Willamette University. There are a couple of other people we want to acknowledge: Maureen Sloan, OLA president in 1992, who gave guidance and assisted Sheffield through the establishment of LSSRT with the finer points of OLA and their requirements, and Deborah Jacobs, OLA president in 1993, who was extremely supportive of our cause from the beginning.

As for the future of LSSRT, we all have high hopes that we can build on the knowledge and expertise we have gained from not only knowing about our LSSRT history but living it! If anyone is interested in not only sharing our history but helping shape it, please contact Katherine Stevens, Maresa Kirk, Deborah Cook, Donna Ainslie, Jey Wann, Doneta Shefford, or any one of many other people involved in planning LSSRT’s future. Instead of being swept back and forth as the buffalo grass, without a trace of change or progress being seen after it leaves—let’s be like others before us who have let the winds of time teach them to become wiser and stronger as we create our future and our history! 

Crabs
(continued from page 3)

My favorite reference questions are those that involve identifying strange creatures that fishermen bring up in their nets. At these times, I am reminded of how strange and wonderful life is and of what a mysterious and beautiful world we live in. I have seen bizarre creatures from the ocean depths and stunning coral that wasn’t supposed to live off the Oregon coast. And there are occasional benefits outside the library. I have stroked the back of an infant harbor porpoise separated from its mother shortly after birth, cast up on the beach, and brought to the center. As I touched him, he snorted and blew; I could feel the wildness of him, and I realized that it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a great gift. It has all been a great gift.

REFERENCES


Reprinted with permission of Library Mosaics.

Susan Gilmont has worked in the Oregon State University Libraries for 17 years. She is a member of People for Oregon Libraries, OLA, LSSRT, and COLT.