
Teaching Reference: Ten Questions from a First Attempt

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I was a little behind in getting this column finished. This semester I took on another project that has required a lot of time: teaching an introductory reference course online for a graduate school of LIS. Fortunately for me, this is a technology column in a reference journal, so I caught up with writing by making this column about teaching reference online. Seriously though, we use so much technology in our reference work and teaching made me look at reference and the technology we use in a new way. Teaching raised a lot of questions, and I will share those along with the answers I found (or at least the musings that I had).

COURSE STRUCTURE AND PLANNING

In what ways is teaching different than training?

Every year for the last eight years I have provided training for the 50+ graduate assistants that work at my library and the ten that work in my department. This consists of about thirty-five hours of training in the week before fall classes start. It takes a group of librarians to provide this much training, but I help with the planning and teach several of the topics. I also lead about thirty more hours during weekly meetings for my department's graduate assistants. This amounts to a lot of training, and I have had years to evolve the content and methods. I had an idea that I knew from doing this training, and from supervising our graduate assistants on the reference desk, exactly what I would want to teach in a reference course. When it came time to put together a syllabus, I realized how untrue this was. For a start, I know that the graduate assistants who work for me will take the reference course, generally in the first semester, and this does affect the content of my training. During training at my library we focus a lot on searching skills, but for the reference class I would be teaching, searching was not important as the students were taught this in a previous course.

Aside from these specific content considerations, there is a major philosophical difference between training and teaching, which may be best illustrated by an anecdote. Early in my time as graduate assistant coordinator in my reference department, one of the students I supervised asked: "Why do we do so many exercises in finding difficult-to-find citations for our weekly meetings? This won't help me with my future work." I acknowledged that this was true, as he would not use this skill much in a public library. However, he still needed to do the exercises as it was a vital skill for his current position working for me. At that time, we had a couple million briefcat records in our library catalog—pairing that with the sometimes sketchy citations brought in by patrons meant a need for this specific training. Now that we have improved many of

our catalog records, I have our graduate assistants do fewer of these exercises. My point? Teaching is not training. The goals are different. Training is as much for the needs of the workplace as for the employee. Teaching is for the student. I hope that when I train, the employees learn transferable skills. It is a requirement in teaching that the skills be transferable. This is where theory and research become important elements in the Master's program, and a reference class cannot be entirely practice in answering questions.

Where do I even start?

Once I discovered that I knew more about training and less about teaching, I looked at other instructors' syllabi, via the generosity of others and the openness of the Internet. I even made a spreadsheet to compare topics and the order of presentation, the assignments and readings. It would have been easiest to start with someone else's syllabus, and perhaps I should have. When examining so many, it became difficult to choose and I ended up trying my own thing, building off of the work of many others.

What is the right order to present topics?

This question is still giving me fits. I still wonder if I taught the reference interview too late in the semester. (It was the fifth week.) In training our graduate assistants, I prefer to teach the reference interview before I teach sources. Part of that sequencing decision has to do with being face-to-face and the practice interview exercise. If the employees have just learned sources, they gravitate toward how to answer the question rather than focusing on the interview techniques. In preparing the reference course, however, I thought that the reference interview might seem too abstract to throw in at the beginning and that somehow learning about sources and types of reference questions would provide an anchor. Also, I knew that I wanted one of the three short papers to be about the reference interview, and it seemed a little early to assign on the second week of class.

The students also answered questions for the Internet Public Library (IPL) which I assigned for the last third or so of the class. My reasoning being that they needed to learn enough about sources and techniques to be able to have a foundation for answering questions. I still believe that this is true, but if I teach again I will have the students start one or two weeks sooner. I will also add a practice e-mail question or two before they start with the IPL. I think that this will ease some of the pressure of the 24-hour IPL turn-around; this is an appropriate policy for their service but made a few of the students feel under the gun. I will also be able to review these questions in a different way, providing feedback to the student without the response already being in the hands of the patron. I think that this will make the students more comfortable as well.

I am pleased with most of my assignments and discussion questions, but the order of the syllabus will be the biggest area of change if I teach this course again.

ONLINE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Should I teach this course the same way as I would to an in-person class?

Obviously the differences in the learning environments make this impossible. The lectures and discussion are structured differently. What would be contained in one three-hour session in a classroom is spread out over the week.

The most vital, perspective-altering and assignment-affecting difference is geography. On-campus students can all be expected to use the same library and hence the same range of sources. With off-campus students I had no idea what they would have access to in print. I could have required that they visit a library of a certain type and size, but even that seemed impracticable. This led to more creativity in the reference sources assignments. Some instructors focus on source examination and comparison. While evaluation is an important aspect to learning reference sources, reference questions get students into sources in a different way. And they are fun. After all, we are interested in being reference librarians to answer questions, not to evaluate sources.

The reference questions were tricky. Sometimes I specified that students use both print and electronic sources. Electronic was easy since they all had access to the university's subscriptions (as well as sources freely available online). But print? What could I ask that could be answered by a student working in a K-5 library, a student visiting a university library, and a student using her local public library? I wrote the questions to allow maximum flexibility in the sources used. For example: When was the Franco-Prussian War? What was the cause? Was there a decisive battle? I had asked students in the first week to describe the library that they would most often use for the course. It was interesting to see them relate their choice of sources back to their user population even when I did not explicitly ask them to do this in the assignment.

With the exception of an ill-fated National Union Catalog question (which I will never assign to a class again), I totally let go of teaching from a list of titles. Specific sources were part of the textbook, but nothing that I reinforced when I talked about types of sources. I would use this same type of exercise again, even on-campus, as it gives the student the most range to mimic answering questions in the type of library setting where she plans to work.

What makes a good (online) discussion topic?

In-person discussion flows in a different way than online. The synchronous nature of the communication leads to questions building off of each other in a way that rarely happens online. On the other hand, an online discussion board gives everyone a chance to add their responses as the conversations stay online for response and do not drift off in the ephemeral way of face-to-face conversation.

The process was disconcerting for me at first. I have taken online classes, but have not been the one to formulate the questions for discussion. When I teach with a class in front

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of me, if a discussion that I initiate falls flat, I know almost immediately and can throw out another topic. Online, I am not sure if the question was uninteresting or if students have just not yet logged in to respond. A few weeks I added an additional question mid-way through the week to generate more discussion. Some weeks I started with multiple questions. But the online discussion boards take more time to read than would have been spent on discussion in a synchronous environment, so I hesitated to start too many topics each week. The very best questions were the ones where the students really *discussed* among themselves and did not just respond to my query. Next time I will have a better idea of what generates an engaging discussion.

How do I convey my experiences?

The reference course that I taught was entirely asynchronous. This is a very important point in terms of the discussion structure and in terms of my lectures (or lack of lectures). I have yet to get the hang of recording a lecture to an empty room. I recorded some interviews of other people and one of me being interviewed. What was lacking was the casual conveyance of anecdote, the spontaneous sharing of experience. Some of this did occur on the discussion boards, and the students, most of whom were working in libraries, shared their experiences as well. Recording interviews and lectures required an amount of planning that I do not employ for in-person speaking, which quashed the spark of memory. The purpose of anecdote is to not just tell a good story, but to relate a point through modeling. Near the end of the semester I realized just how much of this modeling, present when I was training, was missing from my teaching. When the students started the IPL questions they started asking questions that prompted me to understand the value of the anecdote and what I wished I had shared earlier in the class. Too many stories at once is not a good teaching method, so next time I will be sure to plan into each week what I want to model through my experiences.

REFERENCE SOURCES

How many source exercises should I have?

With facts so easy to find online, many librarians have commented on a decline in ready reference questions without a corresponding decline in research questions. I believe this to be true, based on my own experience, but the fundamentals of ready reference remain important. I settled on only two weeks of assignments that asked the students to answer reference questions. A few of the questions were of the “ready” reference type: five poorest nations, Olympic record holders, etc. A few more of the questions were of a research nature: how did the Harlem Renaissance influence Langston Hughes; how does the digestive system work?

The exercise in using sources to answer questions was reinforced by the IPL questions, although those questions relied much more heavily on the use of free Internet sources

given the nature and location of the patrons. Students also created a guide (or pathfinder) which required inclusion of a variety of sources on a topic of their choosing. The students in the K–12 program particularly liked this exercise, seeing the immediate application to assisting students and teachers with topic areas from Countries to Nutrition.

If I have this class to do over again, I will add another exercise that asks students to find answers to ready and research reference questions. It will come later in the semester, maybe as a break after a paper deadline. I would do this not to just introduce more types of sources, but to require them to answer as if they are responding to the patron and not as if they are writing an assignment. I would also add in one question of a type that I do in training graduate assistants, which is that they chose a broad subject (like history), I ask them a question in person (via Instant Messaging for the online class), and they conduct a reference interview and come back to me later (in this case the next week) with an answer. The more I think on what I would change as well as what was successful, the more I hope that I will teach reference again.

Should I teach the NUC?

Okay, I’m asking this question inspired by Joe Janes, who adamantly believes that something should be done about LIS instructors who persist in teaching the National Union Catalog (NUC). Going against Janes’ judgment, I did think that a comparison between the NUC and WorldCat would be interesting for just *one* question. It proved impractical because so few libraries still had the NUC. This is a lesson learned for me. It was my very first assignment for the class, I learned a lot from this one failed question. It reminded me how different my library is from most other libraries. (I do actually use the NUC for a question, every few months.) It also taught me to not cling to a source just because I find it interesting, and again underscored a difference between training and teaching.

READING AND WRITING

Should I assign many readings beyond the textbook?

It has been a ten years since I completed my MLIS. Since then I have taken three PhD courses, so I acknowledged a skewed perception of a reasonable amount of course reading. Looking at syllabi from other instructors did not help me much, as the reading load varied considerably. My syllabus ended up with the textbook and between zero and three other readings per week. This was, during the middle of the semester, an area of uncertainty for me. Was I being rigorous enough? What would assigning more reading accomplish? Or with the number of assignments and the discussion board were the weeks with a book chapter and three articles burdensome?

My biggest concern with assigning readings was not the workload, but the purpose and accountability. It was not enough for me to take it on faith that students would

do the reading. I was uncertain of how to assess that students were reading what was assigned. This seemed like it would have been easier in a face-to-face classroom. I did not want to add more papers or assignments. Many of the discussion topics were of course inspired by articles, blog posts, and professional documents that were required reading, but I did not want the discussions to be consumed by conversations about the weekly readings. Good discussion starters took creativity and finesse to write. With the confidence of most of my first semester behind me, I believe that I can now construct discussion topics to elicit conversation about the readings without being heavy handed or requiring students to post mini-treatises.

Will papers be useful?

This was a question of usefulness for the students and for me. I had established that theory and research were a difference between training and teaching, but how much would writing papers prepare students for the work world? Certainly papers were a good way for me to know if important concepts, such as the reference interview, were understood. It was my conviction in the importance of the research on reference service that resulted in two paper assignments. Knowledge beyond the tools of reference is needed for reference librarians in any setting. It makes us both more grounded and more flexible.

My final syllabus had three short papers. At the time of writing this column, the students have not yet turned in the third paper. It is a reflection on answering an IPL question and on preparing the pathfinder. It is a type of paper that I saw on a few other syllabi, but about which I feel most uncertain in terms of learning outcomes. It is more concrete and not based on reading research papers or applying theory. What will the students gain from it? What will I learn about them? Maybe when I read the papers I will be able to answer in the positive. Right now I hope that they learn that reflection is an important skill for improving as a reference librarian. I know it is an important for improving as a teacher.

SOCIAL SEARCH

Wayne-Bivens Tatum

I've handed over this issue's sidebar to the capable pen of Wayne Bivens-Tatum to highlight a few examples of social search technology, which uses input from users, rather than algorithms, to determine the relevancy of search results. In addition to being the Philosophy and Religion Librarian at Princeton University, he leads technology workshops for librarians around New Jersey.

Something to Use—Worio (worio.com)

Worio semantically analyzes websites, generates tags, and helps you discover websites based upon your own click-through and tagging activity. The search results are just the results from Google, but tagged by Worio. What distinguishes Worio is the discovery feed on the right side of the page. This feed suggests websites based upon the tags. When you click through to one of the suggested links, a Worio box hovers over the page asking you to rate the page thumbs up or down, and gives you options to save or share the link. If you save the link, Worio lets you annotate it and add or edit tags associated with the page. In addition to the semantic search and ranking features, Worio now works with Facebook Connect to index your Facebook profile and feed. From then on, any link posted by a Facebook friend is indexed and tagged by Worio. Your and your friends' activity influences the discovery results. In some ways, Worio combines features of Google, Facebook, Stumbleupon, and Del.icio.us into one interesting package.

Something to Mention—Delver (delver.com)

Delver is another engine experimenting with social search, claiming to bring "you results that are created or referenced by your social circles" [i.e., your networks on Facebook, Myspace, Friendfeed, Del.icio.us, Blogger, anyone who ever went to a school you attended, etc.]. So far all my search results are from people not on my networks, and none of them have been particularly interesting. No one in my hyperextended network seems to be any better at finding useful sites for me than Google's search algorithms. In addition, it's just plain annoying, since you have to enter your name and let it search for your profiles before you can even begin. The only enjoyable thing is entering other people's names and seeing how the search results differ depending on their profiles. I impersonated a few other librarians just for fun. The result lists weren't any more interesting, though. I wouldn't use this one, but in a discussion on web searching I might talk about it just to sound hip.

Something to Mock—Stumpedia (stumpedia.com)

I'm trying to decide which is worse: search results limited by things that just happen to be created or shared by my extended social networks or results limited by websites random people just happen to have submitted to a search engine most people have never heard of. This is a tough one. Stumpedia's tagline is "Power to the People," and it claims it "does not depend on bots, algorithms, or company insiders to make decisions on the relevance and ranking of search results." Almost no search for anything I was actually interested in yielded any results. However, I did get thirteen hits for a search on philosophy. Stumpedia might not rely on algorithms or company insiders to influence results, but it does rely on the user TheBicyclingGui to influence the rankings. Six of the thirteen hits for philosophy go to the website of The Bicycling Guitarist. A webpage on a Hindu interpretation of the sayings of Jesus is not philosophy. "Power to the Bots and Algorithms!"