Reference Services and Instruction
Rebecca Graff, col. ed.

Five Good Things: Incorporating Relational Teaching Practices in Reference Services

Five Elements that Drive Learning

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In her book *Connected Teaching: Relationship, Power, and Mattering in Higher Education*, Harriet Schwartz uses the relational cultural theory from psychology as a framework for creating connections and relationships between students and instructors. Schwartz explores relationships not as an additional element to teaching and learning but *"as a site and source for* learning" itself (emphasis added).[1] In other words, relationships are where learning *actually occurs.* Schwartz posits that "connected teaching consists of and creates five elements that drive learning."[2] These elements parallel the five components (or "Five Good Things") of mutual empowerment, developed by psychologists Miller and Stiver.[3] These components that lead to strong emotional relationships between client and psychologist were the foundations of relational cultural theory (or therapy). The Five Good Things are:

- energy
- knowledge
- sense of worth
- action or movement
- desire for more connection

These five things can be applied to reference interactions easily. Using these techniques in reference services both incorporates instruction techniques and connects with patrons to reduce library anxiety and create a sense of belonging in the library.

Energy
When "energy" is mentioned, especially in terms of classroom teaching, many people might picture a zealous and inspiring instructor ala Robin Williams in the film *Dead Poets Society.* Some librarians may think, "I will never be the type of teacher that comes into the classroom with that style of teaching, who will stand on the desk or have students falling out of their seats laughing." However, Schwartz's description of "energy" in this context does not have to do with the instructor's (or reference librarian's) delivery. We all have friends, family members, or other people in our lives who

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leave us feeling energized after being in their presence. Connection or relationship with others *increases* our (or, in this case, the library user's) energy after the interaction. Every reference librarian has had an interaction with a frustrated or stressed student who was having difficulty finding sources for a research assignment. However, after they talked to a library staff member who gave them guidance about where to look, what search terms to use, and helped them find a few sources, they left the interaction feeling lighter and more positive.

Reference librarians should bring energy to the research questions and ideas of others. Yes, it might be the third time this week a library user on chat asked about finding sources on legalizing marijuana, but we can bring positivity to our library users' questions, even if we are interacting with them on chat. Using emojis and exclamation marks expresses energy that we may not feel in the moment.

Knowledge

Reference librarians love answering questions and sharing knowledge. But how many times has a library user approached the desk and said, "I have a stupid question"? Library workers (hopefully) tell them that there is no such thing as a stupid question. Does that really ring true with that person? Emphasizing that most people have asked the same question can level the playing field, making people feel more comfortable asking for help, not just in the library, but in their lives. Ask the library user to share their new knowledge with friends and colleagues to continue their positive feelings of learning something new.

When learning search strategies or research tips, many people believe they are "cheating" or gaming the system. Methods such as citation management software, reading strategies, or creating search statements are met with awe, but also a sense that they are getting away with something. It seems that people think research *should be hard.* Yes, research is tricky and murky and takes time, but it shouldn't be difficult on purpose. Emphasize that these strategies and approaches are completely appropriate and legitimate.

Schwartz notes that "short, focused interactions enhance a student's repertoire and knowledge."[4] A positive reference interaction with library staff both adds to a person's growing knowledge and solves an immediate need.

Sense of Worth

Schwartz defines intellectual mattering as "the experience of knowing that one's ideas or work has touched or influenced another."[5] Her research on mentoring graduate students demonstrates that intellectual mattering "build[s] the confidence of students who are struggling" and "can help . . . students begin to see themselves as scholar-practitioners."[6]

When working at the reference desk, ask people why they chose their research topic or question. Responses to this question can foster their critical thinking, creativity, and connection between the person and the library worker. When they feel safe and comfortable to do so, library workers can share their own experiences with the topic. Sharing our research experiences and foibles helps others understand that the research process is learned, not innate. It also helps people see themselves as potential successes, especially if they are unfamiliar with libraries or suffer from imposter syndrome.

Using "we" language instead of "you" language during reference interactions shows people that they matter. Some potential phrases to use:

- "We can find some great articles about this topic."
- "Let's see what books are available by that author."

This small change demonstrates that their question matter and that library staff are working on the question with them. Even if the question or request wasn't answered, continuing to work on the question, following up with status updates or the final question increases the person's self-esteem.

Action or Movement

In *Connected Teaching,* Schwartz describes a student-instructor meeting where the student approaches the instructor because they are confused about an assignment, feeling overwhelmed, or having issues outside of the classroom. The student feels stuck in a problem or situation that they do not know how to get out of. Regardless of the reason for the meeting or conversation, the concerns discussed are too large to be resolved in a short period of time.[7] However, if instructors (or library workers) approach these interactions with empathy and focus on what the person's next steps are in the process, they will leave the meeting feeling positive. They have the power to take *action* and move forward.

Schwartz asserts that "the power of connection to fuel movement may be one of the most important yet overlooked aspects of teaching."[8] This statement places library workers at a fundamental stage of the teaching and learning process. When people feel stuck and can't find information sources for a research project, they come to the reference desk (physical or virtual). Library staff ask them a few clarifying questions, then guide them to possible resources for their project. The person now has something to do:

- Browse through a list of search results.
- Read the abstracts of several articles found during the reference interaction.
- Use the search terms or search statement discussed during the reference interaction to search library databases and search engines.

They are moving forward with a plan of *action* because they had a conversation with an expert who took the time to listen to their problem and give them options for next steps. Giving specific actions during a reference interaction ignites their confidence and enthusiasm about the next steps for their project. Depending on the nature of the project and the interaction, examples could include:

- "Now that we have a good list of search results, save the ones you want to look at further. Do you know how to do that in this database?"
- "We've found a great list of articles for your literature review. I suggest you start by identifying common themes across the articles when you start reading them."
- "Now that we've created a search statement for you, I would save it in a document so you can copy and paste it into search engines and databases easily. I can also email it to you, if you prefer."

Remember to first *truly listen* to the person's question before suggesting any action, resource, or giving an answer. Connecting to the library user starts with being present in the moment and not interrupting or attempting to answer their question before they finish asking.

Desire for More Connection

In their book, *Healing Connections,* Miller and Striver analyze relationships and their potential for psychological growth. For a relationship to help both participants grow, it must be mutually empathetic. The Five Good Things that lead to these relationships must be in place for the parties to desire more connection with each other.[9]

Once that connection has been made, it creates positive emotions and grows confidence.[10] If a person's question was answered or their need was fulfilled, remind them to come back when they have more questions. Letting people know that there are subject librarians, archivists, tutors, or other specialists available to assist them spurs them to future library connections.

People may ask general questions to the library reference chat because it is the only place they can virtually ask questions about community resources. Even though they did not initiate the interaction with the reference desk for a research question, this connection will create a positive connection with the library. Potential phrases that can create a desire for more connection with people include:

- "Since you're researching primary sources, did you know that we have a university archive with archivists and staff that help you with finding information in that collection?"
- "We found what you needed for your Education class today but we have an Education librarian who is an expert in that area. You can make in-person and virtual research appointments with them, if you think that will help you in the future."
- "I'm glad I could help you find the information you needed about the city's recycling program today. Come back when you have more questions about research or anything else you need!"

One Good Exchange: Creating Connections in Brief Moments

Teaching librarians typically have limited time with students. The term used to describe librarians' common teaching method ("one-shot" library instruction) implies that librarians only have one chance to share their knowledge with students in the classroom. Reference interactions sometimes are described as transactions, like commodities or a means to an end. Schwartz dedicates an entire chapter of her book to the idea that true and meaningful connections are not bound to the length of time spent with a person. A single, small (but *meaningful*) moment can truly make a difference in a person's day, week, or even life.[11]

To create meaningful connections in small moments, librarians must be *present* in the moment. The questions library workers field can be repetitive, but it is the *first* time for that person. *Active listening* is key to creating connections. Are we only listening to form a response? Do we know the answer before the person even finishes speaking?

Things to remember to create connections during brief reference interactions:

- Don't rush through your instructions.
- Ask if they would like you to repeat any steps or need clarification.
- Remind them that you are there if they need additional assistance.
- Let the person ask their question fully before you begin speaking or even use nonverbal ques, such as nodding your head.
- Try to avoid using memorized or routine answers. Personalize your answer to the person you're helping.

Most important, practice empathy. Librarians only see a snippet of a person's life in real time without knowing what is going on outside of our interaction with them. Life is overwhelming and frustrating, even at the best of times. Many times, a person's frustration with a project, the research process, or technology can be lessened with *authentic* connection and empathy. However, it is important to note that not all interactions are capable of being met with *equal* empathy and respect. Veronica Arellano-Douglas applies relational cultural theory to reference librarianship in her chapter "From Interpersonal to Intersubjective: Relational Theory and Mutuality in Reference." She addresses the additional emotional labor of reference librarians, especially librarians of color. Arellano-Douglas explains that "this foundation for empathy . . . would [be] much more difficult—if not impossible—with a patron who was disinterested or condescending." She emphasizes that empathy "is not meant to position librarians as emotional doormats to hostility."[12] Schwartz emphasizes that connection between instructor and student (or library worker and library user) is not (and should not be) constant. Library users should "experience us as relationally *available* to them, *accessible* for connection" (emphasis added).[13]

Conclusion

People who connect with others increase their confidence, creativity, curiosity, and intellectual mattering. Small and practical changes to reference interactions can be made to practice relational teaching methods. Implementing Harriet Schwartz's Five Elements that Drive Learning into reference librarianship creates connections with library users.

References

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