

Observation 1: Patchogue-Medford Library

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Patchogue-Medford Library is a school district, general circulation public library located in Patchogue, New York. The library has its roots in 1883, when a subscription library association formed in the Patchogue area and was comprised of two small rooms. The library became public in 1900 and had a mostly unremarkable history until the 1990s when it became a local leader in advocating literacy and in helping to integrate the growing Hispanic population of the area. It was one of the first libraries in New York to offer free internet service and computer labs to its patrons, although the initial systems saw little upgrades until recent years. The library was nationally recognized by First Lady Michelle Obama in December when presented with the 2010 National Medal for Museum and Library Service for outstanding community partnership programs. This paper will task itself with an examination of the reference services offered by the library, as observed by the author.

It is Friday the eleventh of February, a balmy twenty five degrees, snow banks still piled up from last week's blizzard. I enter the library from the entrance on Main Street in the town of Patchogue and loiter for a few moments awkwardly. The library is composed of a long central hall, filled with reference and reading desks, with adjacent open floor access to collections, exits leading to the outside main street on either side. A basement has a similar structure to the main floor, although the north side of the building is dedicated to staff offices, activity rooms, a conference room, a computer room and other administrative and support facilities. Lighting is sufficient although sporadic: some areas of the collections on the main level are dark, although still navigable. The building is situated in such a fashion so that the center has tables for reading while the flanks are used for reference support: there is where the librarians and pages are seated.

This is problematic in the sense that most of the cross-plant transportation occurs in the central grounds, creating a bustle for those attempting to study. Visitors must also pass through the central area, creating additional distractions and traffic. Since the library is in a position that connects the mainstreet of Patchogue to the back roads surrounding it, the traffic passing through is not only restricted to library visitors. A notable portion of the traffic in the library is accordingly unnecessary and not related to library service.

Signage is prominent and effective. The entrance to the building is reminiscent of Soviet construction: a prominent, plain, black brick face, with bold white text running across to signify its identification.

There are several reference desks in the library and no central location for reference. The immediately visible upon entrance is the “Homework Central” desk, which is manned by a singular librarian and is dedicated to assisting children. There is clearly a division of labor here. To the rear of the building on the first floor, closer to the back entrance is a large semi-circular collection of tables manned by several librarians. This is the circulations desk, but also appears to function as a reference desk. The librarians and assistants are seated at chairs behind the desks, chatting amongst themselves, using the computers (seemingly checking email), while some are typing and seemingly doing work. There is a small sign in the center of the nearest desk which reads “reference” – there are also ancillary signs nearby which are more colorful and say things like “Do you have a question?” with little blurbs associated with them compelling the viewer to ask for help. The reference librarians themselves are not identified to patrons, other than their physical position in the library. I walk up and introduce myself, state my purpose and then silently drift to the center of the library, where there are reading desks. I

pick one closest to the circulation/reference desk which is about 3 meters away, close enough to eavesdrop on transactions, open a book and pretend to read. I can also partially see the “Children’s Corner” desk, as well as the desks in the front of the library where books are checked out. My intent is to remain as unobtrusive as possible during my observation, so the observer does not affect the operation of the library, although I know I already have by making myself known. This was a major reason why I was hesitant to state what I was doing in the library, and also a reason why I did not call in advance to schedule an observation, contrary to the assignment instructions. I did not want them to be on “their best behavior” or in anyway be instructed by the administration to act in a special fashion because they were being observed. Regardless, after I introduce myself I am warmly welcomed.

I soon realize that the librarians at the desk are actually responding to virtual reference queries, discussing them amongst themselves and some leave to check the stacks. Patchogue-Medford Library offers a variety of ways to conduct reference interviews, by email, phone, mail, fax or in person. While the library used to offer unrestricted online “ask a librarian” reference desk services, it now uses a restricted “live-library.com” system which is only accessible for those with a library barcode (membership) ID number. Nevertheless distance reference is still a significant part of the reference desk activity, as I overhear the librarians chatting about incoming queries, followed by busy typing. Paradoxically I only observed one person actually approach the desk in the two hours I observed – while numerous patrons swamped the “Homework central” area, and the stacks there were literally crammed with as many as a dozen individuals at once, especially after school was out (approximately 3 PM). Entire families

seemed to be asking questions regarding their children's schooling and the librarian there was constantly busy.

As far as reference guides and pathfinders, there are large almanacs, bibliographies and other reference books openly visible and offered on the flanks of the reference desks in the rear of the building. There is also a small stack behind it, with more reference books of various types. While the books visibly displayed are of a more general nature, the specific works are situated behind the desk in the stack. Browsing through the reference guides they are not terribly up to date, most of them being printed in the mid-1990s, but they serve their purpose well. One would not expect cutting edge information from a reference guide anyway, at least while outside of a university library; the guides available at Patchogue-Medford Library at least inform the general place of subjects.

While I observing I noticed no attempt by the librarians to actively rove around the library and see if meandering visitors needed reference assistance, although they quickly and enthusiastically responded to questions. Most of the people entering the library would initially visit the front desks, which are not staffed by librarians but assistants and clerks and begin their inquiries there, to be redirected to the various seated librarians behind the reference and circulation desks. While there is a feeling of detachment or academia (difficult to explain) in the rear of the library, the front of the library, buzzing with dozens of children and Hispanic families, had a more proactive attentiveness by the librarians present. At several times the librarian manning the "Children's Corner" had to go to the rear reference desk and ask for assistance,

whereupon a colleague would cross the library floor and assist the horde of patrons forming around the area.

The library's website was completely renovated in 2010 to meet Library 2.0 standards. Services are fully integrated, reference services clearly posted, and wikified text offers immediate portals of access to library programs. Everything that can be expected of a good library website is here: online catalog searching, social media integration, online access to reference databases and reference guides. An online form can be used to ask reference queries: one box requests any form of contact information, the other calls for the reference question. Such submissions are routed to the librarians at the reference desk, who from my own experience have been able to respond with an average turnaround of only twenty four hours.

The one in-person reference interview I did oversee followed the standard five stage process and was without exception (Sheldrick, Nilsen, & Dewdney, 2002). The patron walked up to the desk and was welcomed to the library and asked if he needed help, the patron reported that he was looking for information on German field marshals of World War II, the librarian confirmed the exact question by determining that the patron was actually looking for information on German generals involved in the Battle of Kursk, the librarian then intervened by providing the location of several records in the stacks and finally concluded the interview by providing feedback, saying goodbye and offering follow up resources. The whole transaction was fairly standard, the patron appeared pleased with his findings and the conduct of the staff was clearly professional.

My observations mostly affirmed principles and concepts affirmed in Cassel and Hiremath (2009). Cassel and Hiremath for instance caution the reader from merely acting

as passive participants in a reference interview and instead act as guides, helping and educating on the process of sound information retrieval (7). At Patchogue-Medford I observed behavior that was in tune with this sentiment, as I overheard the librarians directing patrons to reference resources and helping them achieve access. At other times when I have been in the library (not the day of the observation) I also observed librarians teaching individuals how to do internet searches guided by the principles of academic integrity.

Another principle from Cassel and Hiremath I saw affirmed was the notion that reference interview must be sensitive to context (15-16). In this fashion the reference interview must be an exploration of the subject in order to clearly identify what the patron is actually searching for. This was demonstrated when the man looking for information on German field marshals actually had his query specified to that of an individual battle in World War II. These examples, amongst others, were typical of the exchanges at Patchogue-Medford Library; the library clearly is well functioning.

References

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The “homework central” area near the front reception desks. Typically manned by a librarian tasked with assisting with school work, this area is usually highly active with children, parents and teenagers. Note the sign in the background. Source: official website.