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Consider the Fishmonger:

Creativity and Divergent Thinking at the Reference Desk

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Mindy stared at the computer screen, her brow furrowed and her fingers tugging at an earlobe. The requirements for the travel form spiraled around the Word document like a white collar Möbius strip. If she could only figure out the approved reimbursement request rate for a mid-morning snack when travelling to a destination in the Midwest, she would finally be able to attend the annual Reference & Research conference.

She heard a cough, looked up and saw a patron standing in front of her.

"Hi!" Mindy said. "What can I help you with?"

"Um," the patron, a young man, said, "I need to know some statistics about, uh, salmon fishing."

"Okay," she replied. "Is this for a project that you're working on? Could you tell me more about how you were hoping to use the information that we find?"

"Uh, sure. I'm worried about the effects of fishing on salmon, and so I thought I'd start by seeing just how many fish are being caught. I've just been hearing a lot about salmon on the news lately, and I'm kind of concerned.

"Okay. Have you ever used The Statistical Abstract? Let me show you how it works."

When we are helping patrons at the reference desk (or at any location in the library), we do not always think creatively. We use the resources that have worked for us in the past, and we expect the reference transactions to follow a familiar pattern. Because of that, they usually do - but maybe they do not have to. By making an effort to bring creativity and openness to every customer interaction, we can increase the chance that our patrons will get the responses and resources that are specifically useful to them. It is the reference and customer service equivalent of the second of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science: "every person his or her book" (1931, p. 75). By deliberately choosing to use creativity and divergent thinking when we assist patrons, especially when identifying resources for a patron in the reference environment, we improve our work and the level of service that is received by our patrons.

"Creativity" is a large, messy concept with a tangled history and an ever-evolving definition. A brief encyclopedia entry in the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* provides a good summary of views on creativity going back to antiquity: it has been successively linked with conceptions of divinity, madness, and craft and artisan traditions (Simonton, 2005, p. 495–496). For 20th century theories about creativity, Robert Brown gives a complex but fairly concise summary of them in the opening chapter of the *Handbook of Creativity* (1989). Be warned, however,



Brown frankly states that he is not going to answer the question “What is creativity?” in his single chapter (1989, p. 3). I will certainly not attempt to define the term creativity in this article. However, one particular tried-and-true theory and measure of it which can be useful when analyzing reference or other customer service interactions is the idea of “divergent thinking.” Conceptualized by the influential mid-20th century psychologist J.P. Guilford, it is a method for measuring creativity by analyzing a “response to questions with no obvious, singular answer” (Kaufman, 2009, p. 12). A question without an obvious, singular answer? That will certainly sound familiar to anyone who has worked at a library reference or information desk.

In *Creativity 101*, James Kaufman describes and summarizes the four components of Guilford’s divergent thinking: *fluency* (the total number of responses provided when faced with a question), *flexibility* (the number of unique categories of responses provided, rather than variations on the same response), *originality* (the number of responses which others did not provide for the same question), and *elaboration* (the thoroughness and complexity with which responses are identified within different categories) (Kaufman, 2009, pp. 12–15).

Going back to the example at the beginning of this article, Mindy clearly did not demonstrate a fluent, flexible, original, or elaborate response to her patron’s question.

It has been established in Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney’s classic article on neutral questioning that each patron, and each patron’s information need, is unique (1986, p. 507). As a consequence of this, the useful response or responses to each patron will also be unique, based on the patron’s question, their personality, and the specific situation in their life. The patron in the above example is looking for fish statistics because he is personally concerned about the effect of fishing on salmon species: this is a very different information need from that of an elementary school student doing a report or a college professor working on a research project, even if they might start with the same initial question (“I need to find statistics on salmon fishing”).

One way to get closer to a patron’s true information need is through a thorough and skillful reference interview (and there is certainly much creativity involved in that activity!) For an excellent and practical work about reference interviewing, I recommend *Conducting the Reference Interview: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (Ross, Nilsen, & Radford, 2009). However, in this article I am focusing on the part of the interaction after the reference interview: the time when you must decide what it is that you will give the patron. It is a good opportunity for some divergent thinking.

(The patron just told Mindy that he wants statistics on salmon fishing because he is concerned about the well-being of that fish species. Mindy’s mind raced and adrenaline kicked in as she faced this question with no obvious, singular answer. But then she remembered that, like with every question, she needs to be creative, go slow, and try to think of anything and everything that might help this patron.)

“Okay,” Mindy said, “that’s a great question! I could show you a reference book called *The Statistical Abstract* which is a great place to get started finding statistics, but there might be some other things that would help you with this question, too.”

“Really? Like what?”



“Well, one idea would be to look for any current books about fishing or about salmon – in fact, I think I just heard an interview on the radio the other day with an author of a new book about the effects of commercial fishing: Fished to Death. It sounded really interesting!”

“That sounds pretty good ...”

“We could also look for articles about this subject: the library has lots of databases we can use to search for articles that might have appeared in all sorts of magazines, like Science, or Nature, or The New Yorker.”

(The patron seemed uninterested in the option of magazine articles. Even as Mindy offered these resources to the patron, she continued thinking of other sources that might be useful.)

“And here’s another idea for you,” she said. “We might be able to find a local organization that works with salmon conservation or the fishing industry. Do you think that might be helpful?”

“That would be awesome!” The patron began getting visibly excited. “I hadn’t even thought about trying to find something like that!”

“Great! I bet we can find a few organizations or government agencies that specialize in this sort of thing. Even if they don’t have exactly what you need, they might have more suggestions for where you can go next. And you know what, there’s even a library in Oregon which focuses just on fish and aquatic-related data for the Northwest. And here’s a crazy idea: I wonder what we would find out if we talked about this with someone who runs a fish market?”

Much better! In this second example, Mindy demonstrated each of the different aspects of divergent thinking. She offered a large number of suggestions (*fluency*), making sure to do so slowly and with the patron’s permission. She thought of different kinds of resources, from books to articles to government agencies to other libraries (*flexibility*). She offered authoritative reference sources like *The Statistical Abstract*, but she also was not afraid to try suggesting something a little bit unusual like talking to a fishmonger (*originality*). And, although it is not included in the text of the example, we can imagine that Mindy probably went on to spend some time making a list of local fish-related organizations and talking with the patron about how he might approach them (*elaboration*).

While it is true that in some cases the obvious resource might be the exact thing that the patron needs, it does not hurt to test the waters and try offering something else. Patrons have widely varying expectations about what the library offers and what kinds of service they can get at the reference desk (if they even know about the existence of library reference or information services). In many cases, their expectations might be quite narrow. For example, a large-scale 2005 study by OCLC found that 30 percent of respondents from the United States had never heard of online databases, and 48 percent had never heard of online librarian question services (De Rosa, et al., 2005, p. 158). When we are creative in our suggestions and our answers, we not only increase the chance that we will hit upon something useful to the patron: we can also expand the patron’s understanding of the services that the library has to offer.

However, a patron may not always be as excited as we are in finding more and more useful resources. It is important to regularly and frequently ask the patron for their permission to continue searching and brainstorming. One technique that can help with this is



explaining your thoughts and rationale to the patron, and then deciding together where to look next. For example, in a situation where the patron is fairly clear about wanting to find a book, you could say something like:

“Yes, let’s definitely look for a book about this. But just so you know, this also might be something where we could find a good article from a magazine or a journal – do you want to try looking there, too, after we check for books?”


Creative thinking is an important skill for everyone to utilize during reference and customer service interactions, but it is especially useful for new reference staff. Introductory trainings are a good time to present this concept. New library assistants and librarians at Multnomah County Library, where I work, take part in a training called Research Strategy. This training previously focused on the use and understanding of print reference sources, but it has since been modified to take a more theoretical approach to helping a patron with a research question. It acknowledges the fact that a staff member will spend the rest of their career continually gaining knowledge of tools and resources, and that it would be impossible to learn about every potentially useful resource before the first shift out on the reference desk. New staff can benefit immediately, however, by understanding the range of different types of information sources (in terms of format, content, and authority) and the importance of creativity (flexibility in particular) when considering all potential options for a patron.

Creativity does not have to be limited to just the reference desk: many, perhaps all, patron interactions are an opportunity for creative problem-solving. At Multnomah County Library, one of the service principles for all employees is a “Think Yes!” attitude: “We provide each patron with choices in products and services. We minimize the number of barriers and maximize the number of options” (Multnomah County Library, 2009, p. 1). A non-reference example of this could be that a patron has fines or other circumstances which prevent them from using a library card: a staff member can be creative in trying to find library services and resources to offer that patron which do not require a valid card, such as items to read within the building, library question-answering services, or referrals to other library staff or departments who might have more suggestions. Why should library staff “think yes”? It can make us better at our job serving patrons, and it can reduce stress (because we do not have to say “no” all the time and argue and defend a negative stance). Most of all, it is fun. Instead of customer service robots memorizing and parroting policies and procedures, we can be individuals who apply our creative minds to the task at hand. Every patron interaction can become different and unique.

There is no one way to provide good reference assistance or customer service. But, by making an effort to be creative and divergent in our thinking, we can go beyond responses to the patron that are merely competent and sufficient. We increase the chance that we will find a fantastic resource to meet their particular information need and information situation, and we might even offer them something that they had never before considered. We can have fun and challenge ourselves with each and every reference question.



Time for some homework! Although I have hopefully persuaded you that creativity is an important skill to use in your interactions with patrons, I have not presented any techniques for becoming more creative. That will have to be the subject of a future article (perhaps after I learn what those techniques might be). In the meantime, here is an exercise with which to practice your divergent thinking. You can do this by yourself or (better yet!) with a partner or group of co-workers.

1. Think of a type of reference question that you receive frequently, and then recall (or just make up) a specific question of that type. Write it on a piece of paper.
2. Make a list of possible resources which you might offer to a patron who has this question. Include different formats, different physical or virtual locations, and different levels of depth or authority. Try to come up with as many ideas as you possibly can, no matter how out-there some of them might be.
3. Look at the list of resources that you identified, and think about whether, in sum, they represent a response that is fluent, flexible, original, and/or elaborate. If you're doing this exercise with others, compare and discuss your different ideas.
4. Consider how you might go about suggesting all these ideas to a patron without completely overwhelming them. 

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