Roving Reference: The Wild Librarian

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Abstract

Libraries are concerned about the decline in reference questions and are looking for new ways to connect with patrons. Librarians leaving the reference desk and finding patrons at their point-of-need is called roving reference model. Overall the librarians are excited about the possibilities of the roving reference model, and many librarians support this different approach in providing reference services. A few have found that the model has flaws while other librarians defend roving reference as a way to reach patrons who are being underserved, however the majority of articles about roving reference have been very positive.
Roving Reference

Traditionally the library reference model involves a large desk dedicated to answering questions staffed with a reference librarian. The librarian responds to questions posed by patrons who approach the desk. Statistics show a decline in the number of reference questions asked, and therefore reference services in libraries are changing (Holmes, 2010). E. Stewart Saunders said, “The Internet and Google have changed the information landscape. Librarians now compete for a share of the information market.” (Shumaker, 2009, p. 240). People are still asking questions, and librarians are employing different methods beyond the reference desk, to encourage people to question librarians. Librarians are incorporating technology and techniques that move the reference transaction beyond the face-to-face questions at an imposing desk. Librarians are now seeking out patrons instead of waiting for them to come to ask a question the reference desk.

Librarians have developed a variety of roving models. Some librarians remain in the library building, but no longer stay exclusively at the reference desk. They frequently move around the book shelves and check with patrons to see if they need help. Other librarians have moved their reference services outside of the library. They can be found in classes or in the school cafeteria where students gather. The roving librarian utilizes mobile technology to connect them to the library and other to librarians. The roving reference librarian is learning different reference skills, and is working out what best serves the patrons in their community. The transition to roving has not been smooth. The roving model deals with issues like insufficient staffing problems, budget constraints, and
technology issues. Many articles highlight the benefits of roving in libraries, and many feel the idea is worth exploring to better meet the ever changing needs of patrons.

**In-house roving**

The *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* or the RUSA Guidelines states,

“[The librarian] roves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible. Librarians should make themselves available to patrons by offering assistance at their point-of-need rather than waiting for patrons to come to the reference desk” (2004, section 1.7).

The RUSA Guidelines goes on to say that reference librarians who rove around the library provide patrons with the “initial steps of their searches” (2004, section 1.7.1). Roaming the library is a foreign concept for many library workers, and requires “a different world view” (Pitney & Slote, 2007, p. 56) from the long used waiting-for-patrons-to-find-you model. Therefore, changing the reference model requires clear expectations, and training.

The roving librarian should be scheduled to work on the floor just as the reference librarian must be scheduled to work on the desk. Other librarians may have a choice of leaving the desk to rove when not busy, and check back at the desk regularly to see if anyone is waiting. Scheduling shifts for library staff to roam, and putting that expectation in staff’s performance plans has been a successful method for the King County Library System or KCLS (Pitney & Slote, 2007).

Changing the reference desk is another way to encourage roving. A massive reference desk poses an intimidating barrier, and some patrons are reluctant to approach the
librarian, so libraries are changing the large traditional reference desk to a smaller, less imposing desk. A smaller desk is supposed to alleviate the intimidation of a larger desk. Another benefit of smaller desks is that it forces librarians to stack less work on the desk. A large pile of work on the larger desk sends a ‘don’t bother me’ message to patrons. Many patrons are uncomfortable bothering a busy librarian, and so they leave. The smaller desk model discourages large piles of work on the desk, and the librarian will be able to better greet patrons (Pitney & Slote, 2007). The Westerville Public Library has removed the reference desk completely while librarians and assistants roam the library answering questions, and checking out the materials on hand-held computers for patrons.

Director Don Barlow is quoted saying that “[t]raditional library service doesn’t work any longer” (Burek Pierce, 2006, p.39). A library system near Denver, Colorado called the Rangeview Library District came up with a distinctive roving brand called Anythink to gather support for their troubled library system by providing a different look and feel to library service. Roving librarians didn’t really have a name other than ‘roving’ until the conception of Anythink came along. Similar to the Westerville Public Library, the Rangeview Libraries have no reference or circulation desks. Staff members roam around with mobile units to help out where they are needed hopefully wearing comfortable sneakers (Oder, 2010).

The way the Anythink library organizes their collection, is also different from other libraries. Norman Oder reported that the library system dropped the Dewey organization system all together, and modeled their system after the Maricopa County Library District system to create WordThink. Rachel Fewell, the collection development manager, calls the new word-based system “simple”, and looks forward to the
opportunity to measure the success of the changes are (2010, “Embracing WordThink,” para. 2).

**Roving outside of the library**

Some librarians have decided to find patrons outside the library building. Academic librarians want to let students know that they are there to help them, and educate them on the types of services a library offers. Many libraries have librarians who are experts in different fields of study. How do students find out about library resources if it doesn’t occur to them to explore the library? One way the librarian can connect with students who have trouble making it to the library is to set up a mobile reference spot in places near where students gather. They set up a table in the cafeteria, or in the halls where classes are conducted. They schedule time to meet with teachers, and visit classrooms (Holmes, 2010 & Shumakers, 2009).

The librarians at Texas Tech University have t-shirts that matches their mobile cart. “The librarians take the cart around campus at the beginning of each semester assisting students, parents, and even new faculty,” says Vacek (2011, para. 2). The librarians have an opportunity to meet as many people as possible by showing a very visible, positive side of librarians. The librarians answer a variety of questions from students and parents as they explore the campus. The three librarians Cynthia Henry, Carrye Syma, and Kimberly Vardeman sow positive connections with first interactions with students, and promote library services. The librarians report that they have had positive feedback about this popular service, and at times have been so swamped with questions that keeping track of how many questions they have encountered has proven difficult (Vacek, 2011).
Technology needs for roving librarians

In order to provide effective reference service, roving librarians need to be able to connect with libraries databases, catalogs, telephone system and other staff while they are away from the desk. There are many options available for roving librarians to help keep in touch with reference sources and other library staff, such as walkie-talkies, i-pads, end-of-stack library catalogs, VOIP telephones, and wireless voice communications. Wireless or mobile devices link staff members together so they can call each other. The roving librarian and the reference desk librarian can easily be in communication and the roving librarian can provide back up for the reference desk librarian (Pitney & Slote, 2007). Without mobile computers or end-of-stack catalogs, library staff would have to run back to the desk to use the computer or to answer the phone, in order to help patrons. The patron would have to follow the librarian to the desk or be left waiting in the stacks until the librarian comes back. A librarian risks losing patrons’ attention if they are left waiting alone in the book stacks. The librarian may be stopped by other patrons, or the original question takes more time to locate than expected. The librarian would have a difficult time keeping the patron involved with the reference process if the patron is left in the book stacks. Running back and forth would be exhausting for both patron and staff.

Skills required for roving librarians

Sneakers may be recommended for roving around, but as Schmidt says, “Quality reference work takes more than just being able to construct a complicated Boolean search; it takes social intelligence, too.” (2011, "The hard sell," para.1). Librarians need to be trained on how to approach and how not to approach people. Some shy librarians may have a difficult time approaching a patron, while other more out-going librarians
would have no difficulty. No one wants to bother patrons when they do not want help, but librarians do want to find the patrons who are reluctant to ask for help. Patron service training is very important so librarians can learn how to gauge who needs help and who needs a quick smile. Pitney and Slote note that the KCLS trains their staff in three different categories in their “Skills for More Adept Reference Transactions” or SMART for short. The training instructs the librarian “(1) to model four behaviors that demonstrate approachability, listening, informing, and closure, (2) to learn when and how to make referrals, as appropriate, and (3) to develop a personal plan to help improve customer interactions.” (2007, pp. 58-59). Staff members need to believe that the roving plan will improve the experience for both patron and library staff, or roving doesn’t work.

The Orange County Library System commented that “[s]enior staff are modeling behaviors. It is a stroll to see if someone needs assistance rather than a brisk walk. The strolling makes the staff approachable, while a brisk walk makes them look like they are going somewhere else.” (Forsyth, 2009, p. 81). It’s interesting that some patrons are so reluctant to ask librarians for help that they avoid the reference desk, but some librarians are also just as reluctant about approaching people in a library. They therefore risk losing an opportunity to help. Training gives librarians the tools they can use to be able to mingle with patrons. The KCLS lists some tasks to do while roving such as:

“restock new book and paperback displays; restock display books in stacks and on range ends; restock flyers; weed on condition; push in book ends and straighten shelves; reshelve nonoversize books placed on bottom shelves; reset catalog-only computer screens to fresh search screens; reset Internet computer to log-in screens;
reshelve reference items from reference cart; help patrons with self-checkout; address noise and behavior issues; and remain available” (Pitney & Slote, 2007, p. 58).

**Downside to Roving**

There are some problems that have arisen with roving. Due to lack of money, some libraries simply don’t have enough staff to rove around the library and staff the reference desk at the same time. Reference desks are left empty, while some libraries have simply removed the reference desks from the library. Jen Waters posted on the YALSA blog that her library recently closed the teen desk, because of budget cuts and roving. She is concerned that the teens will be ignored “unless all staff members are equally committed to working with and engaging teens, they may as well not rove in the first place.” (2010, para. 2).

Librarians work on projects while they are scheduled on the desk, and roving makes desk work difficult. The time librarians spend on the desk may be their only chance to work on projects, while others want something to do while they wait for opportunities to help patrons. The KCLS addressed the work-on-the-desk issue. They looked at jobs that took up lots of time such as scheduling, putting together storytimes, and weeding, and tried to reduce the time librarians spent on them. Software called “When to Work” was used to create schedules. Teams were organized to create storytimes and to put together teams to weed (Pitney & Slote, 2007). These changes reduced desk work and gave the librarians time to roam around the library. Librarians
reduced the busy look they create while working at the reference desk, replacing it with an “I’m here to help you” look.

Another downside to roving is the librarian who is reluctant to or refuses to leave the desk. Some librarians may be physically unable to rove, while others are uncomfortable with approaching patrons because they are shy. Others just need to learn the skills. Burek Pierce said that when librarians initially heard about roving they were concerned they would turn into “Wal-mart greeters” (2006, p.39). Some reference librarians don’t believe that roving is any better than staying at a reference desk and so refuse to rove. A few librarians, dismayed about the expectation of roving in the library leave the library (Burek Pierce, 2006).

Librarians are concerned with invading a patron’s privacy, and patrons want to be independent. Reynolds is concerned that when librarians are roving around the computer area people will feel their privacy is violated. Patrons, innocent or not, do not want to be patrolled (2005). Patrons may be reluctant to use the library if they feel they are being spied on.

**Technology**

Budget constraints limit the technology needed for roving. Libraries may not have the budget to purchase mobile units or to put OPACs at the end of shelves or for wireless capability. WordThink is designed to be intuitive about the words people use to search for books, but many libraries still use the Dewey decimal system or the Library of Congress system. Therefore a roving librarian would have to have a good memory, and be willing to send patrons to someone else if they do not remember. Marianne Reynolds dislikes working with librarians who don’t pay attention to the reference desk when they
decide to rove. She doesn’t have a way to let the second librarian know that the reference desk is busy (2005). Many libraries are old, and installing a wireless connection in not feasible. When a librarian disappears into an area that does not get reception they are unaware of what else is going on in the library. Some of the technology can track where the staff member goes, which creates a problem of staff privacy. The other side of this issue is that library staff can use the technology to call for backup or to ask a question.

**Benefits of roving**

The KCLS library documents their roving reference experiment. The results have encouraged them to expand roving to the entire system. The statistics show that about 40% of the patrons declined help or assistance from a librarian, leaving 60% who accepted help. The survey also indicates the patrons “needed ready reference help, in depth help and machine assistance. [They] also discovered that roving staff regularly attended to behavior and security issues.” (Pitney and Slote, 2007, p. 55). Roving created an opportunity to reach people at their point-of-need who may have not approached a reference desk. Roving also helps alleviate lines that form at a reference desk. In addition it decreased problem behavior before it escalated into more serious issues.

Roving helped the librarians be approachable for patrons who are shy or reluctant to ask for help. Roving outside the library created a positive memory for students who don’t normally visit the library. Introverted librarians may initially feel awkward in approaching patrons, but introverted patrons will feel just as awkward in approaching a librarian. Clearly defined staff training is such an essential tool for the success of the roving reference model.
Conclusion

Four issues about roving are of a serious concern: expensive technology, budgets concerns, training, and removing the reference desk. Technology and library budgets will constantly change for libraries. Libraries need to invest in and experiment with technology that works best for their library staff. Poor technology would limit what rovers can do. They would only be able to direct patrons to the reference desk for help, and aides already do that. What technology tool works for one library may not work for another. Staff needs to be carefully trained with the technology before they have to use it with patrons.

Totally removing the reference desk from the library is a major concern. It may limit the number of reference tools the library can use. Many library patrons are seniors and are used to using a reference desk. They may have a hard time moving around as much as they once could. It would be a disservice to seniors if they had no place where they could sit down. Another concern is that staff may be scheduled on the reference desk for hours due to a reduction in staff. Roving around in a library for long periods of time without a break would be hard to manage physically, and may have a negative effect on patrons if there is often a librarian hovering nearby.

There are two exciting benefits of roving reference that have emerged from the articles about roving. One is prying reference librarians away from projects they work on the desk to interact with patrons. Librarians do not want to look so busy that patrons decide that they are reluctant to interrupt them. Comments in the articles about reference roving suggest that many librarians struggle with knowing how to greet people. Training these librarians on how to interact with patrons is essential. Librarians have the
opportunity to learn social skills in order to better discern what the patrons in their library want or need. It is vital that reference librarians are comfortable away from the reference desk for roving reference to work. The librarian also needs to have good social skills because there is a fine line between roving and annoying people. Library systems should investigate what type of reference models would best suit their system by roving inside or outside a library and seeking patrons at the point-of-need or as a KCLS patron said, the “point-of-puzzlement” (2007, p.57). The library building may be so small that roving isn’t really necessary to be able to see everyone. A blend of roving and desk time may be the solution to meet the needs of patrons. Libraries must decide if roving is a more useful reference tool than having the reference desk staffed or whether their needs are best met by roving or references desk styles of service.
References


