What is the future of the reference librarian? Looking to Bourdieu for answers

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Abstract

Because a concern was raised over the sustainability of reference librarianship, causing alarm on a professional online forum, this essay explores the assertion that reference services are no longer an essential part of library service. General observations of reference desk and nonprofessional information desk services are analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993) concepts of field, habitus, and power. Additional discussion of LIS literature also reveals why fear over reference sustainability exists. Conclusions suggest that power of the reference librarian may be inadvertently directed toward nonprofessional agents, and reference professionals must recognize their opportunities in today’s information environment if they wish to maintain and build positions in their field.

*Keywords:* reference, libraries, Bourdieu, field, habitus, power

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Introduction

On a statewide library listserv, alarm was raised over the following subject heading: “Does Oregon need reference librarians?” The string of posts started with a blogger’s comments regarding something heard to the effect that reference was no longer needed as a stand-alone course in a masters of library science curriculum (Frazier, 2012).

A flurry of posts followed, both on the listserv, and on the blogger’s site, arguing for the importance of reference work, while acknowledging that reference in the field is indeed changing. Expressed sentiments, some representative of the majority expressed, included: (a) “the questions are changing, but they are still plentiful” (spierson@ccsld.org); (b) “reference is still an important service” (Hill, 2012); (c) “reference is definitely not dead…libraries are re-examining how they define and implement it as a service” (Stroud, 2012); and (d) “my primary job function is not dead” (Brzozowski, 2012).

Some industry articles on the topic do not overwhelmingly support the blog and listserv users’ posts. Lewis (1995) states that “traditional reference service is already dead” and “if we have not done so yet, we should bury it” (p. 12). Rempel (2010) reports on a formal debate between librarians at a professional conference, arguing either for or against the assertion that reference is dead. Some of the arguments for the idea include “the reference desk puts librarians in a passive position” (Rempel, 2010, p.1) and the physical reference desk “does not reflect the reality of users’ needs” (Rempel, 20120, p.1). Those in support of the livelihood of traditional reference argue, “the physical reference desk provides the reference librarian an "anchor”…[and] without this anchor, librarians and patrons risk drowning in a sea of confusion” (Rempel, 2010, p.1). Those pro-reference also assert “the reference desk is the "emblem" of the library, and both the physical desk and the service it represents are a comfort to patrons and librarians alike in an environment that is changing rapidly” (Rempel, 2010, p.1). Ahlers & Steiner (2012) suggest altering the look and the feel of the reference desk in order to make it “more approachable” (p. 70). The authors describe an ideal reference desk as one which is “transaction height” so librarians can sit or stand, and stools with “padded backs and seats” (Ahlers & Steiner, 2012, p. 72) for both librarians and customers.

The professional literature offers a mix of suggestions. Carlson (2007) says that “in library circles, questions about the future of reference have lingered for years, and proposals to get rid of the reference desk go back as far as the mid-1980s” (Carlson, 2007, p. 26). Andeen (2001) suggests making the reference desk a marketing tool, focusing more on librarians’ communication with the public and promoting or “selling” the library by being knowledgeable of what the library offers and making that known to the patron. Others say to do away with the desk, but keep the librarians, and their reference functions. Davidson & Mikkelson (2009) describe “service points primarily staffed by library student assistants and sometimes paraprofessionals” (p. 347). Questions library staff could not answer were referred to professional librarians unless they were not physically present (Davidson & Mikkelsen, 2009, p. 352).

The reference desk has been hanging in some kind of limbo, it seems, at least since Ford (1986) suggested we could do without it. Yet others admit what might be more in line with the truth: that the reference desk is a librarian’s “security blanket” (Barclay, 2004, p. 2), and while the profession may consider different approaches to service, it will continue to support traditional reference “till the day Hell freezes over” (Barclay, 2004, p. 2). The debate continues to beg the question: What is going to happen to library reference?

One way to explore this question is through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on cultural production. Specifically, Bourdieu’s concepts of a field, the habitus of its agents, and the power struggles that ensue are utilized when reflecting on the functions of public library reference desks, and nonprofessional information desks. A brief discussion on library reference literature follows.

An introduction to Bourdieu’s *Field of Cultural Production*

Bourdieu discusses many of his ideas through the examination of phenomena in the world of art and literature. For example a work of art, Bourdieu tells us, comes from the “space” within which the work was created. This “space” or “cultural field” has within it a number of players or “social agents,” all contributing to the work of art’s value (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30). Bourdieu’s discussion of these “values” through the examination of art and literature are also useful for other fields of study, including libraries. According to Budd (2001), “Bourdieu’s focus is not on the individual…but on societal dynamics”. These dynamics can yield valuable insight to the field of libraries, and for our purpose of examining reference. Some of the most productive of Bourdieu’s ideas for this discussion include the connected concepts of field, habitus, and power.

Field

A “field” can be a disciplinary field like librarianship, or education or literature. Each field functions primarily independently of one another, but is often structured similarly (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 6). Within a field there resides a “space of possibles” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64), or opportunities within a field. These opportunities for positions can be obtained based on the number of agents in the field, and the “subjective basis” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64) for an agent’s possible role given the conditions in which an agent’s chances can be realized.

Habitus

Within a given field there exists the notion of “habitus,” which is a “system of dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 71) or a kind of “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5) which participants share in common (these can be distinguished also by class). Habitus can be described as

a ‘practical sense’…that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second nature” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5).

According to Bourdieu, one’s habitus builds over time, and is shared with other participants in a field. The habitus of participants or “agents” determine the “space of available possibilities” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64) of creation and divide the vocations within the field. In the library field, divisions are reflected, in part, in how library service is carried out: some agents are reference librarians, some work with advancing technology, cataloging, or other roles, and others are nonprofessional staff in various roles such as serving at a general information desk or circulation desk.

Power

With a given field, struggles for positions can ensue. The division and the value of contributions—monetary and symbolic—and the effect of dominant and dominated positions within a field render the issues of power and hierarchy. Power is a complex phenomenon; those who have it occupy established, respected, legitimate positions and produce economically valuable goods. Hierarchies in a field can be economically or symbolically based (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 47). Bourdieu uses the example of the field of art, where drama brings in the highest profits and has few producers, novels are in the middle and can range in profits and has many producers, and poetry brings in the least amount of money and again has few producers (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 47). Symbolic hierarchies depend more on symbolic or cultural capital where value and appreciation of a product is based on developed knowledge of that product (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7).

Examining the “Space of Possibles” in the Field of Public Library Service

In the field of public librarianship, agents are made up of library employees (professional and nonprofessional) and sometimes volunteers; positions within a hierarchical structure and filled based on criteria such as education, experience, and expertise. A symbolic hierarchy may also be present, largely through tradition, and also with the demands of the consumers and the ability of library personnel to meet those demands. Within the field of public libraries, the “space of possibles” allows for professional librarians to seek and fill limited opportunities for reference librarian positions. It also allows for those without a master’s degree in library science to work in a similar capacity, without the title of “reference librarian,” professional recognition in the field, or in all likelihood equal pay.

In many libraries, reference desks are located out of view from the entrance of the library, replaced instead by information desks which attract a variety of questions. This can be viewed as a form of “tiered” information service, a change in the field realized through the behavior of consumers needing a general place to ask any kind of question (Tyckoson, 2012, p. 585). Positions at information desks are filled primarily with nonprofessional agents who are positioned to first interact with and serve consumers in a variety of capacities. If library information services are structured in this tiered fashion, it is no wonder why so many question the future of reference. Given the habitus of the players, however, it is no wonder why reference is still around.

The Habitus of the Reference Librarian and of Nonprofessional Staff

It is widely noted in library literature that those who are attracted to the library profession are from middle-class backgrounds and bring with them values that influence library services (Williment, 2009; Wray, 2009, Berman, 2007; Campbell, 2005). The public library field, consequently, is imbued with middle class norms, particularly in the case of professional agents such as reference librarians. Personal observations however reveal that reference librarians can appear aloof and somewhat elitist, while services at information desks staffed with nonprofessional agents often appear friendly, approachable, and in demand. The value added by nonprofessional agents, and internal recognition of that value, may go underappreciated, however, and not placed on the same level as reference services. This is because the habitus of professional agents creates what Bourdieu calls “fundamental divisions of the field of positions” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64), which are closely tied to the dispositions of the agents. For professional agents, their positions are vocations, gained because of their “daring” and “risky, long-term investments” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64) to be where they are. They are tenacious (relative to the field) about defending the value of their work. Nonprofessional agents’ habitus is less certain as a whole (they are not grouped, studied, and written about as librarians are), though might be described as “modest” or “disinterested” or temporarily filling a position (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64), even though their observed work ethic generally appears otherwise. Moreover one might surmise that because nonprofessional agents did not make the same investments in librarianship as professionals (particularly regarding education), they are also not as outspoken about their value, and necessity. Ultimately, one’s habitus influences perception, and the perception the positions and dispositions reference librarians want to convey is that reference is a necessity and an essential mainstay of the library: its anchor. If it’s working, however, why is there a debate over the future of reference?

Power in the Field

Reference librarians, or the “dominant class,” “occupy the economically dominated and symbolically dominate position within the field” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 44). This keeps them in an exclusive place of their own: middle-class, educated, and higher paid. Staying true to Bourdieu, we might say the dominated, or nonprofessional agents are important to the dominant class in order to maintain dominant agent positions; dominant agents “need to draw on what they are offered by the dominated fractions, in order to justify their class domination, to themselves as well” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 44). Whether or not this is overstated, tiered reference does inherently promote what the dominant class has to offer: expertise needed for addressing the tougher questions. It was likely not intentional, when setting up tiered reference, that the dynamic of dominant and dominated homologous positions played out where the exclusiveness of reference librarians becamea bit *too* exclusive. The internal changes appear to have affected the structure of reference in such a way, however, that consumers with questions ask agents who are perceived accessible. And while Bourdieu notes the importance of social homology between an agent’s product (in this case, it would be the agent herself and the service offered) and the consumer, the approachability and efforts of nonprofessional staff situated behind an official-looking desk may institute an unintentional change to reference as it is currently structured.

This is not solely due to internal changes and consumers’ reactions to these changes, however. The questions and needs of the consumers themselves are changing, as noted by professionals in the listserv comments, and by Aho, Beschnett & Reimer (2011), who point out that personal computers are empowering consumers and are all but eliminating the need for the “mediated search” (p. 46). The authors, discussing a biomedical library, tell of reference desks transitioning over the past two decades due to the changes in their consumers’ needs, resulting with desks primarily staffed by non-librarian staff and student workers. They also note that what aided in the resulting current model was that once a librarian left his job, the professional position was not refilled.

To what extent does a lack of exposure of professional agents to at least some of their customers ultimately effect their positions of power? And how can professional agents continue their place in the field in an empirically removed role?

The librarian’s market of consumers is an autonomous one, and one that was anticipated through the tiered reference strategy. The original reason behind tiered reference was to free up reference librarians from directional and other non-reference-type questions (Tyckoson, 2012). The structure, from all outward appearances, seems to work for the consumer: friendly agents are there to get to know them, and build relationships, trust and legitimacy. To this end, keeping reference librarians less visible is a strategically poor move. Bourdieu (1993) tells us “strict application of the autonomous principle of hierarchization means that producers and products will be distinguished according to their degree of success with the audience” (p. 46). Evidence of the value of knowing your audience is described by Sisselman (2009), who suggests that there may be a connection between a librarian’s understanding of the social style of her patrons and the success of the reference interview. If this is the case, who has the advantage when a consumer has an information need: the nonprofessional who knows or is at least recognizable to his consumers, or the reference librarian removed from being recognized by his consumers?

Given the advantaged position of nonprofessionals at information desks, the extent to which reference desks can be staffed until “hell freezes over” (Barclay, 2004, p. 2) may be due to what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural capital which, in this context, refers to “the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 1986, para. 4). This kind of capital is slowly and unconsciously acquired, and used in this sense, it is a form of “symbolic” capital because it is not consciously recognized as cultural capital. Instead, it functions as a “token of status” (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011, p. 78) but one which is always at stake. For example, a group who grew up knowing their public reference librarian subconsciously now, in adulthood, may recognize this person as wise and trustworthy. That same status can slowly be built with others as well, but is difficult to do without interaction.

It may be said that cultural capital, combined with the deterministic qualities of their habitus, is currently being used to prop up the professional agents’ place in the field: a risky strategy. But just as there will always be newcomers to a field, there will always be change, and with luck the habitus of new professional agents will allow for their positions in the field to somehow be maintained, and any cultural capital being lost, regained.

Further Discussion

If we look at the research in the field of library science, we can generally see the librarian profession working to find a way to maintain a vital role in the world, even if it does not altogether address the issues of human interaction suggested in this article. Astrom (2007) analyzed library and information science research journals from 1990-2004, and found that information behavior studies, essential to the practice of reference services, were strong in the early 1990s, fell off somewhat in number in the mid-1990s, and increased in number in the late 1990s and early 2000s though were “more empirically oriented and relating to systems and system development (p. 955).

Within the “space of possibles” in the professional literature, agents writing about technology are filing limited numbers of spaces, perhaps to the detriment of those who write about human interaction and information behavior. To this point, in a recent article in Library Journal titled *Preaching to the unconverted: talking to non-library audiences about libraries*, the topic of the piece was not on average users or under-served marginalized populations and understanding their needs, but on how to attract and serve already tech savvy consumers (Greenwalt, 2012).

The new generation of librarians, or the “millennial generation” are the first to grow up with computers and internet access in their homes (Becker, 2012), yet in truth, all agents in the field of librarianship are affected by the changes technology has brought. According to Becker (2012), “we…agonize over the perceptions and preferences of information consumers and about the staleness of [our] library brand” (479). This agonizing, as Bourdieu might explain it, likely come from our dispositions, as we adjust to the current and changing climate in our field, or “the cycle of simple reproduction” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 57) where the young bring “dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 57). We can see this play out in the literature, to some degree, perhaps not only because of young newcomers but because of “external changes” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 57) in the form of technology. In an online peer-reviewed journal, Lingel (2012) attempts to counter the belief that “libraries are being existentially threatened by the emergence of digital technologies” (Lingel, 2012, para. 1). Using Bourdieu as our lens, we know that this perceived threat is a natural process, and one to which we can adapt as a profession; how it further affects the positions within our field is the question.

Conclusion

Through general observations in the field of reference services, and with the application of Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and power, this author feels that concern for the viability of traditional reference services may be warranted. The attempt in the field to shield professional librarians from unworthy information requests may be resulting in a loss of power in the form of cultural and symbolic capital for reference librarians, and perhaps even a shift in power to nonprofessional agents. It is suggested that these circumstances change for the field to support reference librarian positions in it. The habitus of the reference librarian, and particularly new agents attracted to the field, must be able to recognize the value of interaction with their customers in order to maintain their positions, and inspire more.

Our citizens deserve educated, skilled information professionals who can uncover and understand what they are seeking, help them navigate our growing and fast-changing information environment, and select results that best meet their needs. At no time in our history have our communities needed us more. We should be visually on the front lines, building cultural capital, and ensuring our positions in the field as we enter further into the information age.

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