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Technology in Practice. The DIY Patron: Rethinking How We Help Those Who Don't Ask

Meredith G. Farkas
Portland State University, meredith.farkas@pcc.edu

The DIY Patron

Rethinking how we help those who don't ask

by Meredith Farkas

L ike many librarians, I was a frequent user of libraries as a child. Yet I have always avoided asking for help. I wrote an entire undergraduate thesis without talking to a librarian. If I didn't understand something, I'd find a way to figure it out myself.

For years, my experiences fueled my desire to make the reference desk more approachable. There's considerable research on library anxiety, and many people see libraries as places with lots of rules they don't understand. I still believe in the value of making the library more user-friendly, but I don't think approachability is the only reason people aren't using reference services.

Like me, many people simply want to figure things out for themselves. And when there's something about the library they don't understand, they won't go to the reference desk. They'll go elsewhere.

Last year, Bohyun Kim, digital access librarian at Florida International University in Miami, wrote a thought-provoking guest post at ACRLog (bit.ly/rq0oHS) arguing that the emphasis librarians still place on mediated models of service is misguided and may be moving us toward irrelevance. While I believe that reference and instructional services should still be at the heart of what we do, the idea of rethinking our services in light of the DIY mindset spoke to me.

Kim is right: Many library services are based upon a model that no longer exists. In an environment of information abundance, librarians are no longer gatekeepers of valuable bits of information and databases that cost us dearly for each search. Yet our reference services are based on an environment of information scarcity.

This is not a call to decrease our focus on instruction but to look at how we can support DIYers at their points of need in using library systems that are frequently not user-friendly. So many libraries have created tutorials, but most simply put learning objects on a "Tutorials" page and call it a day. When patrons are having difficulty searching a database, how many think "I wonder if the library has a tutorial on this"?

We need to think about how we can empower these DIY patrons by embedding help into their research workflows. When they have a problem with their information seeking, help should be available seamlessly—whether that means providing a how-to tutorial within (or beside a link to) a complicated database or making maps available in areas of the library where patrons often get lost. This requires understanding our users' information-seeking behaviors—through methods such as

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web analytics, ethnographic research, and usability testing— and thinking about embedding help beyond the library's walls and website.

Libraries also need to rethink how we create online instructional content, which is often designed based on how we teach. A patron looking for information on how to determine whether an article is scholarly doesn't want to go through a long tutorial about peer review to find the answer. At Portland (Oreg.) State University library, we're developing a system that will help users quickly find the small piece of instructional content they need to solve their problem. It will be like having a reference interview without the student having to ask for help.

If we want to appeal to the growing population of DIYers, we must enable them to use our resources without coming to the reference desk or a workshop. In-person services are valuable, but we can't make their use a prerequisite for being a successful information seeker. ∎

MEREDITH FARKAS *is head of instructional services at Portland (Oreg.) State University. She is also part-time faculty at San José State University School of Library and Information Science. She blogs at Information Wants to Be Free and created Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki. Contact her at librarysuccess@gmail.com.*