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Remote Reference Consultations Are Here to Stay

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Abstract

Remote reference consultations have considerably increased due to the need to provide remote services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting reference consultations via videoconferencing not only offers many benefits to student researchers; it also presents an opportunity for librarians to embrace a learner-centered teaching mindset when approaching remote consultations by developing consultation learning goals in alignment with the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Designing consultations to be learner-centered yields benefits for students, such as the student actively practicing their own searches as well as more thorough source evaluation. Additionally, videoconferencing technology allows for a more seamless information sharing experience and has the potential to provide a more equitable experience for students with disabilities.

Keywords: remote reference, reference consultations, pedagogy, information literacy, ACRL Framework

Perspectives

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Remote Reference Consultations Are Here to Stay

The COVID-19 pandemic offered libraries an opportunity to reconsider the delivery of traditional services. At many academic institutions, reference consultations transitioned from primarily in-person meetings to remote consultations via videoconferencing software. After more than a year of Zoom consultations, I have found remote consultations to be a superior method for engaging with students, and I intend to continue offering remote reference consultations since there are many advantages, such as students engaging more proactively with library resources as well as benefits offered by videoconferencing technology.

Reference is Teaching

Reference consultations are a pedagogical tool special to librarianship; scholars debate if reference consultations should be considered a signature pedagogy of the library profession (Otto, 2014). Successful reference consultations not only assist students with their research needs; they also offer a unique opportunity for librarians to exercise pedagogical practices that are tailored to an individual rather than a class of students. Reference consultations can also help librarians to develop a professional relationship with budding researchers. We ultimately teach them more than just research skills; we also teach them how to interact and communicate in a professional setting. The ability to make a more personal connection with individual students is a reason why many librarians love working with students via reference consultations.

Conducting successful reference consultations can be practiced by thinking about reference services from a teaching and learning perspective. The discourse surrounding “instruction” usually focuses on one-shot library lessons or credit-bearing information literacy courses. Conversely, “reference” has historically been viewed as a transactional service: the patron asks a question, the librarian supplies an answer (Alexander, 1941; Weyer, 1930). When there is a question, come to the library for an answer! This begs the question: who benefits more from the transactional nature of reference services? The user who finds what they are looking for or is provided with an explanation otherwise, or librarians who get to feel rewarded for doing a good deed for someone? A patron is not just someone with a need but someone with potential to learn how to find this information for themselves in the future. There is a popular proverb whose origin is unknown: “If you give a man a fish, you feed him

for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.” Reference consultations offer us a valuable opportunity to teach a student to fish. While providing a quick and easy answer may feel more efficient in the moment (and there certainly are times when simply providing a quick answer is appropriate and necessary!), it can also lead to missed opportunities for additional learning. Reference consultations are not just about providing a service for patrons; they should evolve into teaching and learning experiences. Taking advantage of benefits offered by videoconferencing technology during remote reference consultations can help to transform reference interviews into teachable moments.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Reference and instruction services have both evolved as we have learned how to make our library services more effective. In 2015, ACRL adopted the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, which identifies six interconnected core concepts that act as a guide for teaching librarians to engage with students about information literacy topics. While many librarians and administrators have wrestled with how to implement the *Framework* into library instruction sessions at their own institutions, there has been less discourse about how the *Framework* can support other instructional experiences like reference consultations.

The most popular reason why students sign up for a reference consultation with me is because they need to locate appropriate sources for a research paper. The frame I employ most commonly during these types of reference interviews is “Searching as Strategic Exploration,” which encompasses the searching, finding, and evaluating steps of the research process. Other frames can also be beneficially incorporated during reference consultations, such as “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” as well as “Research as Inquiry” or “Scholarship as Conversation.” I usually use “Searching as Strategic Exploration” as a gateway frame into discussing more complex topics identified by the other frames, such as investigating authorship or how to interpret and synthesize conflicting information.

Remote Consultations Produce Enhanced Learning Experiences

The *Framework* is a flexible document—it is capable of providing support to librarians who wish to treat a reference consultation as a teaching and learning experience. Meeting with a student for a reference consultation remotely is particularly conducive for an improved teaching and learning experience by allowing the student to become the driver of the consultation. During a remote consultation, after we have discussed the student’s general

questions and the determination is made that they are hoping to locate some sources, I ask the student if they are comfortable sharing their screen with me. The answer is nearly always yes, but I do feel it is important to get their verbal consent and give them an opt-out opportunity in case they have sensitive documents or notifications they would not want me to see. If a student is not comfortable, I offer them the chance to use the remote control feature of Zoom so that they can navigate my computer. Whether or not the student uses their own computer or mine, the end result is still the same: they are able to fully control the search process. This allows them to take ownership of their learning, and they learn by experience rather than by observation, which is crucial for retaining new skills. I guide them through applying the knowledge practices in the “Searching as Strategic Exploration” frame:

- *Match information needs and search strategies to appropriate search tools:* they navigate the library website, explore subject and/or course guides, and identify online resources appropriate for their topic.
- *Design and refine needs and search strategies as necessary, based on search results:* they evaluate an overall set of search results and then practice different keyword strategies and using appropriate filters.
- *Use different types of searching language (e.g., controlled vocabulary, keywords, natural language) appropriately:* they identify synonyms and additional keywords from their search results and may explore the database’s thesaurus.
- *Manage searching processes and results effectively:* they save their searches and results directly to their device.

As I guide them and question them in order to stimulate their thinking and learning, their experience evolves from passive learning to active learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991); instead of just watching me demonstrate a database, they practice searching the database for themselves. This type of learning reaches the Application and sometimes the Analysis levels of expertise according to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives for Knowledge-Based Goals (Bloom et al., 1956). Since students get to actively practice search skills, more questions surface about specific online resources, search strategies, and accessing results than if they were simply watching me demonstrate searches.

Once a student has a set of search results, more thorough evaluation of individual sources occurs. To evaluate a source found during an in-person consultation in which the student

does not have a device, the student will have to be in close enough proximity to the librarian's computer to be able to read the article's abstract, citation, and other metadata. They have to ask the librarian to maneuver through the document and other bibliographic information. I often get the impression during this step that students feel pressured to decide whether to keep or discard a source quickly, and this pressure rushes them into a decision and does not allow them to relax enough to thoughtfully evaluate the source. When they are on their own device, they can maneuver through the search results as they wish, they can take their time reading over the entry, and they can open the full text to take a quick peek. Then they can decide to do what they want with the result directly on their device, whether they download the PDF, copy the permalink, save the search, or move on to other results. This gives me the opportunity to discuss with students their different options for evaluating and managing results, a knowledge practice in the "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frame.

Benefits of the Remote Environment

Teaching the concepts identified in the *Framework* is not limited to in-person activities; in fact, there are several benefits to an online setting that should not be overlooked. Some of these benefits include:

- Students learn using functional technology.
- Chat tools make sharing information across devices simple and instantaneous.
- Individuals with visual or hearing impairments can take advantage of accommodations built-in to many videoconferencing platforms that would be more difficult to provide in an in-person setting.
- Students have the opportunity to take more ownership of their learning.
- Learning can occur at the student's pace rather than the librarian's.
- Students can learn from any location with a stable internet connection.

These benefits are most present during videoconferencing consultations. Historically, when I used to meet with students in my office, I found that they often did not bring a suitable device to conduct their own searches or effectively save results. I usually would proceed to demonstrate various searches on my work computer, but students were not able to practice skills such as navigation, exploration, and keyword searching themselves. A learning

outcome for each of my reference consultations is to empower the student to take away something tangible from our consultation in order to continue their research. This could be a list of keywords, databases to search, articles to peruse, etc. While students without a computer have often taken notes by hand during our consultations, an inefficiency of this process is that they need to recreate the search techniques used during our consultation on their own time without additional guidance. With the transition to remote library services, I have found remote reference consultations to successfully encourage students to actively use their own smart device at a higher rate than when they meet with me in person.

When both the student and the librarian operate separate devices during a reference consultation, it is very easy to share links, search strings, and other relevant textual information using the videoconferencing software's chat feature. The capability of seamlessly sharing information is much more efficient in a videoconference than in person when only the librarian has a device. In the past, I have accommodated the lack of a student device by drafting an email with information we want to save in text form and then send it to them at the conclusion of our consultation, but this is still a less efficient option. One of Ranganathan's laws of librarianship is to "save the time of the reader" (Ranganathan, 1931). This law can also apply to reference consultations. We are always striving for that perfect balance of letting the learner struggle productively to build knowledge, which requires time and effort (Bereiter, 2005), offering guided learning opportunities, or sometimes just directly offering solutions, the fastest form of help. We want the student to learn, and they retain information more effectively when they discover the answer for themselves, but this requires both effort and time. It is much quicker to just provide them with a source for which they do not have to put in any work in order to locate, and this saves them time, but does not help them practice the search process or learn how to find a similar source again in the future. The chat feature is a great option when the best strategy is to simply share a link to a resource, a search query, or other information. This saves the time of our learners, which frees up the rest of their time for focusing on practicing their research skills.

One lesson we have learned over the course of the pandemic is that remote instruction has certain advantages, one of them being that, when done correctly, learning can be more accessible to students with disabilities through the use of videoconferencing software. Offering services such as live captioning, the option of recording a session, and screen reader support are all videoconferencing features that benefit students with physical or learning disabilities. Similarly, remote reference consultations can take advantage of offering

the same benefits. Consultations can be captioned and recorded, and students can use their screen readers and other specialized equipment; all of this would be more challenging to accommodate during an in-person consultation. Accessibility is not just about meeting mandated requirements because it is necessary by law; it is also an ethical responsibility to do our best to level the playing field so that all students have the same opportunity to get an equal education.

Looking Forward

So, what could reference consultations look like in the future? It is very possible that remote courses and online courses are here to stay and will operate at a higher capacity than in pre-pandemic times. According to the Reference and User Services Association's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (2013), "Reference assistance should be available through a variety of technologies at a patron's point of need." It is important that we continue to meet our students at their point of need, whether that is at the library or in their homes. They may not attend classes in person on campuses at the rate to which we are accustomed. And many students who do attend in-person classes may prefer to use this type of service from home rather than traveling to the library or meeting with a librarian in person.

Once students return to campus in greater numbers, it should be relatively simple to implement a "location" option into reference consultation scheduling, through which the user can determine if they would prefer to meet in an office or remotely. Lessons learned from remote reference also impact my plans for future in-person consultations: I plan to more strongly encourage students to bring their laptop to an in-person consultation with me, and I am considering how to best utilize an online messaging tool to make link-sharing between devices more accessible and immediate.

Remote reference consultations support student learning by meeting students where they are, and they offer the opportunity to transition the responsibility of formulating search strategies from the librarian to the student. The librarian can act as a guide while letting the student take ownership of their learning by leading the search process. This allows students to focus not only on the mechanics of searching but also on operating in the mindset of a researcher by developing dispositions as identified in the "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frame of the *Framework*. These dispositions include exhibiting mental flexibility, realizing that information sources have varying relevance and value, and

persisting in the face of challenges. Students can also more effectively practice managing their results if they access online resources on their own device. While in-person consultations will not and should not go away, remote reference consultations are also here to stay. Through the power of videoconferencing, reference librarians can employ the *Framework* to evolve a simple reference consultation into a powerful learning moment that can position a student on a journey of transformation into a researcher.

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