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Incorporating Race-Centered and Trauma-Informed Practices into the Reference Interview

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Introduction

Prior to the swell of social protests that began in 2020, American society had already been affected by recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter (#BLM) and #MeToo. Questioning the status quo regarding race, sex, gender, power dynamics, and the desire to right historical inequities has been evident in all segments of society. Libraries must also adapt to keep pace in a society that is confronting its oppression and marginalization of traditionally underrepresented populations. At community colleges, the student population is comprised of a greater percentage of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students than is found in the overall undergraduate population.[1] Considering that in 2020, 83 percent of librarians identified as non-Hispanic white people,[2] it is especially important to avoid perpetuating historical harms when serving our students. Closely examining how we engage with our communities is especially necessary in a community college setting, where our students' educational journeys are often compounded by

multiple responsibilities not commonly associated with the college experience. At least 80 percent of community college students have part-time or full-time jobs, their family obligations compete with schoolwork,[3] and, on average, community college students are older than students at four-year institutions. Reference services play a major part in the lives of students who reach out to librarians not only for research help but also as a point of contact within the institution. Therefore, we must move beyond traditionally taught guidelines and common reference practices. Reference services must be inclusive of all groups and maximize opportunities for community college students to succeed.

External factors have prompted a change in how librarians offer service to community college students. Students are witnessing and participating in worldwide social justice movements that have emerged from the margins to the forefront of a society polarized by competing politics and ideologies. As supporters of the entire campus population, and the student body in particular, community college librarians have a responsibility to respond accordingly in a changing world. This begins with taking a critical look at reference services and outlining alternative practices. These steps will allow us to provide a fully engaging and transformative learning experience to marginalized students, those with disabilities, and those dealing with trauma in their lives.

Reference Interview in Practice

As community college librarians, we use the *reference interview* to gauge the needs of our students. This requires us to take on the role of a detective, asking a student the right questions and getting to the heart of their inquiry. This conversation should be viewed as collaborative work from the perspective of the librarian and student. This reference session is crucial for a successful interaction that provides a meaningful experience for community college students. There is a tremendous amount of literature regarding reference service practices, including tips on how to best provide this service to our communities. Official guidelines set forth by the American Library Association (ALA) consist of these five points: (1) approachability, (2) active listening, (3) summary, (4) search strategy, and (5) follow-up.[4]

Approachability covers aspects of proper signage for identifying a librarian and making contact information available in person and remotely. It emphasizes adhering to welcoming behavior norms and avoiding being perceived as intimidating or confusing.[5] It places focus on a librarian's behavior and body language. The guidelines ask for us to make eye contact, conduct roving reference, and acknowledge the student before looking at the computer screen.

Active listening pertains to the communication portion of a reference interview. The guidelines encourage using the right tone of voice, which is left to interpretation by the librarian. Open-ended questions are suggested to allow patrons to fully explain their information needs. According to the guidelines, we must avoid using library jargon because it serves to alienate the student or, unintentionally, make them feel inferior.[6] We are to remain receptive throughout the interaction. Aside from practicality, these techniques are designed to build the student's trust in the reference session. *Summarizing* the students'

needs shows a full understanding and allows us to provide clearer guidance by simply rephrasing the patron's question for confirmation.[7]

We must devise a *search strategy* and explain those steps to the student during the reference encounter. Recognizing the appropriate database or a guide comes from assessing the inquiry internally. We are also required to be respectful and cognizant of the student's time.[8] Finally, *follow-up* makes sure that we have provided the student with sufficient help. This process requires asking whether the student has more questions and encouraging them to return for further assistance. Sometimes an appropriate referral is necessary.[9] Repetition serves to embed these reference steps into our psyches, and we often follow these guidelines without thinking about them as distinct steps. Nevertheless, they continue to be the foundations of basic reference service for all student populations and all types of reference interactions, including online, with modifications appropriate for remote communication. The onus is on us to expand upon each guideline and make them specific to the community we serve.

Although widely taught and valued for their objectivity, the reference interview guidelines do not consider intersectionality, neither our own nor the students'. They do not leave space to consider the needs of a diverse community or to incorporate cultural competency skills. The thought process behind them originates from a way of thinking and behavior that arises in white mainstream authority and advantage.[10] Those who are trained to provide service according to these guidelines will inherently miss the way they perpetuate values rooted in white hegemony. Their neutrality is not to be celebrated; the qualities of neutrality force everything to be compared to the dominant identities of white, heterosexual, cisgender male, and able-bodied.[11] Therefore, individuals must possess "a level of privilege to be seen as …neutral."[12] This skews the reference interaction with a student when our lens is thus limited (and biased). Anyone or any information source that does not align with the narrow factors associated with neutrality is deliberately marginalized. These reference interview guidelines describe a librarian's behavior that places value on the conduct deemed acceptable by the dominant culture. This view alienates BIPOC students and other underrepresented groups because they are provided with a service that does not consider historical or cultural contexts. Neutrality does not acknowledge white identity or privilege, and this greatly affects a reference transaction.

Approachability, as it is currently applied, encourages monoculturalism. Positionality, the awareness of an individual's position relative to others, is not considered,[13] and this can affect how students perceive us. During this encounter, a librarian unaware of their power dynamic can easily miscommunicate well-meaning gestures to students, thus making that specific guideline on cordiality meaningless. In addition, those of us who do not recognize our privilege can make common communication mistakes that include not recognizing the user, interrupting, not providing follow-up contact information, and asking more questions than necessary.[14]

General advice on proper tone and what constitutes friendliness is not helpful without context; systemic racism, oppression, and traumatic events complicate a student's educational experience. Understanding this reveals the limitations of the reference interview guidelines in effectively offering the best reference service. For example, offering a smile

will not alleviate the larger issue of a lack of diverse representative resources in a library collection for a student researching important topics in their community. A friendly gesture will not provide resources for a homeless student who lacks a stable space and Wi-Fi access outside the library.

A lack of historical context for BIPOC students and disempowered groups (such as disabled persons, undocumented immigrants, children, transgender youth), including those who have experienced trauma, can easily create an uncomfortable and insincere reference transaction. Oddly enough, sincerity and genuine concern are not part of the guidelines for a successful reference interview. Those qualities can support being more culturally competent. Responsiveness is also affected when color-blind guidelines are encouraged. Color-blind ideology believes equal treatment automatically creates an equal society. However, avoiding race allows covert manifestations of discrimination to be ignored. Community college students often face social realities that must be recognized to foster the most appropriate response from us. When ignoring such truths, a student might be perceived as difficult or the transaction as challenging, especially with a patron of color. As aforementioned, guidelines designed to value ideals associated with whiteness do not equip us with skills needed to work with non-white students. This creates a reference environment prone to microaggressions.[15]

Finally, these guidelines do not explicitly promote the reference session as a collaborative process. They continue to uphold the power dynamic of a librarian as the one who possesses all knowledge and the patron as a passive participant. As academic librarians, we must instill confidence in students. Our students should feel capable of seeking information on their own after we help them. In addition, the reference session should function as a moment where we act as a team with students. We can learn from the situation just as much as the student; hence the significance in making the session student-centered. Such a reference interview also encourages student empowerment, allowing them to express their views. Students should be made aware that the experience they bring is meaningful to the research process.

Reference Education

A conversation on examining bias in the reference interview practice cannot take place without serious consideration of current library and information science (LIS) education curriculum. Most librarian positions require a master's of library and information science degree from an American Library Association–accredited graduate program. Library students are taught topics such as library history, reference, collection development, leadership, and other areas of the profession. LIS schools educate students on information needs and how to provide services for communities.[16] Within this educational framework is the reference interview that students learn and practice.

As highlighted previously, the reference interview guidelines in policy and practice perpetuate a centering of whiteness, allow for implicit bias, and can further marginalize students who are from traditionally disempowered groups—BIPOC communities, immigrants, trans communities, persons experiencing homelessness, veterans, those who have

been incarcerated, those with disabilities, youth, and other underrepresented groups. LIS students are taught reference skills in this manner because the LIS curriculum adopts those same qualities of color-blindness and non-inclusivity.[17] In general, the programs do not include critical race theory or consider power dynamics between librarians and their communities. It is no surprise the reference interview, as taught, would embrace color-blind values because it mirrors the curriculum. The reference interview practice must undergo drastic changes not only in its application but its education too. Library students should be introduced to topics of multiculturalism, privilege, decolonization, and how to apply an understanding of these to their reference services.[18] Reference education should allow students to critically examine their own intersectionality relative to the patrons they will serve. Library students can create mock reference interactions with classmates. This activity can allow students to discuss how their interactions incorporate cultural competency values and acknowledge their positionality.

LIS students should question the current state of reference service guidelines and discuss ways to improve them. Topics of equity, diversity, and inclusion must be interwoven with reference education. When programs do so, students can be equipped to serve diverse communities. The inherent avoidance of these issues, particularly race, in reference education is counterproductive. The decision to ignore it promotes disparities.[19] LIS students expect to work in a variety of institutions, from public libraries and universities to private companies. They must understand the way these institutions encourage inequities among the public.[20]

This inclusion of critical race theory and social justice values in reference education can greatly enhance students' abilities to properly address and serve diverse patrons. Library students transferring to professional positions will be able to interpret the reference model from a place of inclusivity, thus allowing for class awareness and racial/cultural sensitivity to take place during an interaction.[21] With this different understanding of the reference guidelines, areas of approachability, searching, and listening will inevitably be impacted. For example, using a revised and inclusive reference education, we may allow for purposeful silence or pauses during the reference interaction. This allows the patron to take their time and gather their thoughts until they are ready to be heard. Individuals from disempowered communities should be reassured that their voice is necessary and valued, especially in an intimate interaction with a librarian, a representative of the institution. Regarding the area of searchability, more of us may become more adept at identifying implicit bias in the searching tools utilized for a student's information needs. It would encourage us to seek information from marginalized authors or sources when providing reference help to a student.

Trauma-Informed Librarianship

As previously discussed, more community college students come from non-white, first-generation, and lower income families than do students in the general undergraduate population. Consequently, it is imperative that librarians consider the historical, racial, and power dynamics of many librarian-student interactions and actively avoid

perpetuating harmful practices. Conversing with every student who visits the reference desk or chat queue allows librarians to express genuine interest in their information needs, determine their level of familiarity with the library, and help them feel comfortable and welcomed into a new environment.

Once students have received the information sought, we should not assume that they understand how to proceed. Asking permission to demonstrate a process or offering directions to a resource should be standard practice in reference interviews, not something that students must request on their own. When helping a student locate a physical resource, do not ask if they know where the relevant section of the library is or point them in its vague direction. Instead, offer a clear explanation of the classification scheme in use and, if possible, walk with them to its location, including them in the process of locating that material. If a student has asked you how to access a specific database, go through the process yourself, starting from a point that should be familiar to them, such as your college's main website. Once you have accessed that resource, walk them through a search for the information they want. Even when speaking with people from your community college who are clearly familiar with academic libraries in general, it is still worthwhile to demonstrate how to access resources and services that may be unique to your library.

Examine policies and procedures related to reference services and think critically about those that serve to satisfy information needs and those that codify certain behavioral expectations that ultimately have no relation to the process of acquiring knowledge. Instead of telling students they should adapt to the rules and regulations that have been uncritically continued for decades, the library itself must change. Although the library of the twenty-first century is a very different place than the library of the past, many of our policies stem from norms that date from long ago. Knowing that many community college students work at least part-time jobs, why do libraries often prohibit the use of their open spaces as a place where students can sleep? Being aware of how likely our students are to have responsibilities outside of their education, why not provide a space to accommodate other needs that we can meet, such as grabbing a snack or napping until their next class? Instead, we penalize them for meeting multiple needs at once. Bearing this disconnect between what the library provides and what the community college student of today may need, we should also consider how librarians conduct the reference interview, one of the foundational practices in librarianship.

Consciously rethinking the reference interview could allow librarians to dismantle the power imbalance inherent in this facet of reference service. Traditionally, the reference interview has positioned the librarian as the expert and the student as the receptacle of the knowledge transmitted by the librarian. Importantly, aside from the student presenting their information needs and answering the librarian's clarifying questions, the flow of knowledge in this interaction is imagined to go in only one direction; this traditional reference interview leaves no room for the possibility that the student will bring to the interaction any expertise or knowledge that could be imparted to the librarian. These dynamics are incompatible with a collaborative approach and immediately place the student at a disadvantage.

Instead of doggedly replicating the traditional power imbalance, the community college reference interview can be reimagined as an inherently collaborative interaction, in which both parties enter with knowledge that the other lacks. The student usually has some idea of what they need to know and may have already tried on their own to find the information they are requesting the librarian's assistance to find.[22] Likewise, the librarian has knowledge of search strategies and a level of expertise in that specific library's resources that the student does not possess. In a successful reference interview, these two parties will combine their individual knowledge, agree upon what is being sought, and devise a strategy that will yield the desired result: the satisfaction of the student's information needs.

One way to create a more collaborative, less authoritative dynamic in reference interviews is to approach them from a trauma-informed service perspective. This approach holds that

> trauma results from an event, a series of events, or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.[23]

In trauma-informed service, one should always keep in mind that people may have experienced traumatic situations in their lives—such as homelessness, abuse, or food insecurity—and therefore seek to be thoughtful about how we engage in our interactions with them.[24] Additionally, since power in American society is inextricably linked with race and representation,[25] community college librarians should be mindful of the potential existence of trauma in the community college student population, as the plurality of these students come from traditionally underrepresented and disempowered groups.

According to United States Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a trauma-informed approach is based on six fundamental principles: (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness and transparency, (3) peer support, (4) collaboration and mutuality, (5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues.[26] Integrating these principles into a community college library's service model must start at an organizational and policy-making level. This will help the library avoid bringing further harm to populations whose lives continue to reflect their traumatic experiences. While fully implementing a trauma-informed approach needs to occur on a macro level, several of these considerations are well-suited to the reimagined reference interview.

Ensuring *safety* means providing and maintaining an environment that is both physically and psychologically secure; the community college library should feel like a safe space for its students. Especially when considering the demographics of community colleges and how BIPOC groups often experience more policing and report more negative interactions with police,[27] the presence of campus police or security personnel in the library may undermine the very safety they are presumed to ensure. Showing librarians to be

physically unthreatening and speaking in a measured tone throughout the reference interview can help create an environment where students feel safe to engage.

To exhibit *trustworthiness* and *transparency*, all operations and decisions must be designed to build and maintain trust in the students we serve. This should happen at all levels of library operations. Community college librarians can show trustworthiness and transparency in the reference interview by talking with the student about the search strategy and why it is followed—explaining, for instance, our choice of one database product over another for a certain type of search. This gives students a better understanding of our thought processes and demystifies librarianship. Librarians should understand the importance of exhibiting trustworthiness and transparency, as they are central to our profession's understanding of information. They are why, when possible, we default to the use of primary source or peer-reviewed materials to locate information from sources that are most likely to be accurate. In the same way that librarians know to use subscription databases for information that is backed by reliable evidence, we should strive to provide service that shows us to be reliable sources of assistance, support, and information.

Peer support refers to establishing an environment that is conducive to trauma survivors working together and supporting each other. Through direct service, including reference interviews, and far-reaching activities such as outreach, community college librarians can demonstrate our commitment to working toward students' success. This commitment should extend beyond their immediate information need and include considerations of what they need—such as childcare or a reliable source of food—to even be able to focus on their educational careers.[28]

We should consciously work to mitigate the power differential that exists between librarians and students, which might limit students' comfort in contributing to the reference interview. To demonstrate *collaboration* and *mutuality*, librarians should introduce themselves, offer a bit of information about themselves (e.g., "I have been with the library for the last five years and am the liaison to the psychology department.") and encourage students to do the same. Ask them about what they are studying and what interests them about that discipline; show students that you care about them as more than a number on the visitor tally. Model search strategy, then solicit search terms from them, showing you recognize that their input is valuable to the information-seeking process.

Along those lines, librarians can use the reference interview interaction to empower students to contribute. Especially considering that many of the students who comprise community college student populations come from historically underserved and underrepresented groups, it can be *empowering* for librarians to foster an environment that invites student participation and welcomes their contributions. This is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that we will listen to students and not speak over them.

Librarians should avoid giving students the impression that we do not believe they have anything to contribute to the reference interview process beyond communicating their information needs. While we want to instill in our students the confidence that we have training and knowledge to assist them with their inquiries, librarians should not attempt to seem omniscient. Showing our work by explaining our search process and engaging students by asking for keyword suggestions can bridge the historical divide

between community college librarians and students and will highlight students' meaningful role in the discovery process. The reference interview should be used to highlight students' existing skills that can be cultivated to benefit them academically and beyond.

Conclusion

We as librarians can make a conscious effort not to allow stereotypes and biases to dictate our interactions with students during the reference interview. Humans are susceptible to conscious and subconscious prejudice. We must pay attention to how we interact with our students and be honest about how our behavior may elucidate implicit preferences and attitudes that we would never consciously express. Additionally, instead of imagining the library as a race-neutral space, librarians should employ an approach to the reference interview that is both race-centered and trauma-informed. The community college student population is comprised of a greater percentage of BIPOC students than is found in the overall undergraduate population, therefore, ignoring that race is often a factor in our students' lives would do a disservice to populations that have a greater chance of experiencing race-based trauma.[29] From an equity standpoint, treating all students the same does not assist those who start out at a deficit; we must strive to try to eliminate the barriers to success faced by students from historically underserved groups.

The number of students who take only online courses or engage with the library's services only online has increased over the last decade,[30] and it is worth paying attention to the different ways that librarians interact with students remotely, rather than in person. Conducting reference interviews through a trauma-informed lens can help librarians recalibrate their expectations about how the reference interview will unfold, regardless of modality. If community college reference librarians can come to view themselves as partners with the student information-seeker, it will go a long way toward transforming the reference interview into a more equitable experience that better reflects twenty-first-century values.

As the country is forced to face long-standing issues of systemic racism and class disparities, this is an opportune time to discover ways of improving reference service to diverse communities of students. It is important to revisit obsolete policies and practices to create the best experience for all community college students. Treating the reference consultation as a collaborative process is a vital change; this approach provides an opportunity for students to understand their contribution is valuable to the information-seeking process and increases their level of engagement. It supports confidence building and reconditions students to believe themselves active agents in the process of information seeking.

Applying a trauma-informed service method further promotes participation, helps nurture trust, and improves communication between librarians and students. This perspective honors the student experience and emphasizes listening for the librarian. It allows us to be conscious of our own role, identity, and power in relation to the student and uncover ways this might unintentionally affect the reference interaction. In addition to employing a trauma-informed service practice, community college librarians must

critically examine guidelines that promote the idea of neutrality and homogeneity and place whiteness as default. Through this analysis and adopting techniques that consider an individual's experiences and historical context, we can offer more meaningful reference assistance. Embracing an inclusive approach to librarianship is the most effective way to support community college students and expunge the celebration of neutrality within library services.

Notes

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