

## Reference Services and Instruction

*Rebecca Graff, Col. Ed.*

# Teachable Moments in Reference

Rebecca Graff and Matthew Torrence

Libraries, particularly libraries that have a teaching mission, should take advantage of teachable moments during reference interactions. Teachable moments occur when people are open to learning. Reference encounters, in many instances, should be approached as a chance to help someone learn, rather than simply providing them with information. This column will give practical applications of when to help library users learn during a reference interaction.

Library workers often take advantage of the teachable moment in person, taking people's requests for information as an opportunity to teach them how to conduct research for themselves. Similarly, teachable moments in virtual reference can provide information literacy instruction and guide users in their research process, rather than solely answering their immediate questions. Helping someone learn offers a chance to show users how to arrive at answers themselves, thereby strengthening their research skills.

Additionally, a reference interaction might be the only opportunity to teach information literacy skills to a person, making it crucial for librarians to take advantage of the moment. While it can be challenging to provide the same level of instruction as in face-to-face settings, virtual reference offers unique ways to engage students in learning. For example, librarians and service providers can make their thought processes transparent by using clear techniques to explain their search strategies and resource evaluation and use "show, don't tell" by co-browsing, pushing URLs, or guiding users through steps in real time.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes it's easy to identify a teachable moment. If someone is confused and you can provide clarification, then use that uncertainty to help them. Whether in-person or online, pay attention not only to what the person is saying but also to what they aren't. These opportunities to share information may not be obvious, so we look for and create teachable moments. However, before inserting instruction into your reference interview, ask yourself whether it truly is a teachable moment. In other words, is the person receptive to learning? If they are, leverage the opportunity. If not, don't force it.

During reference interactions, we respond to questions, but not always with answers. Often, our help is most needed when crafting a complex search or identifying search terms. When demonstrating what you are doing, clarify your choices. Explain why you used quotation marks around a phrase, how you identified and limited to subject terms, and when, as well as why, to use

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a truncation symbol. This type of introduction may be extended to the basics of subject heading systems that assist with more advanced searching and the user's level of information need and scope of their paper, project, or other endeavor. Consider each decision as a chance to expand and scaffold learning. If you are responding to a complicated question initiated via chat, ask if the person is open to joining you through video. Co-browsing is great for demonstration, comprehension, and education.

Along those lines, explain your choice of a particular database by saying why a selected resource includes information likely to complete the project or assignment. It is also relevant to cover access and instruct the person on what to do if the article, chapter, or other material is not available. This is another good opportunity to explain how an ideal reference may be available in another source despite only having an abstract or citation in the database initially searched. Microteaching moments provide personalized instances for serendipitous instruction.

For example, many people are reluctant to use a book as a source because they believe they must read the whole thing. So, it's worthwhile to share how to use a book's table of contents, chapter titles, and index to help individuals take advantage of the pieces that might be applicable to their question. Remember to suggest that they should look at the bibliography to find additional relevant sources. Before you send someone off to get a book, double check to see if they are familiar with reading call numbers. If not, this is an opportunity to teach them whatever system your library uses.

Asynchronous reference encounters, in particular via email or fillable form, allow a user the time to submit a written request for help that has the potential to be very detailed. Correspondingly, they allow a librarian the time to submit a thoughtful, thorough response, often with links to resources that could provide more help, offering a chance to improve the user's information literacy skills.<sup>2</sup> These interactions can provide a librarian with both an idea of a user's level of information literacy and a chance to help the person improve. Asynchronous email reference may also be used for incremental instruction on the user's preferred time frame. Some studies have successfully mapped virtual reference interactions to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, demonstrating the feasibility of teaching these concepts asynchronously and at the point of need.<sup>3</sup> Creating and using shared templates in email reference can also standardize the delivery of fundamental information literacy concepts.

Similarly, standardized templates as a follow-up to research consultations allow library workers to reiterate and elaborate on instruction that took place during the session, furthering the teachable moment. Consultations typically offer individual instruction and provide the chance for the information professional and the person to explore a specific project in detail and take into account the user's needs. Teachable moments are authentic, as the person has a specific project and questions, making the instruction timely and relevant. These learning opportunities are especially valuable as they occur naturally when the user is actively engaged in research and most receptive to learning.

Avoiding assumptions is another good way to find teachable moments. When helping someone identify useful articles, ask them if they are familiar with abstracts before telling them to look at an abstract. Then, explain that they can help you get a better idea of what the article is about before reading the whole thing. Clarifying library jargon is essential for making teachable moments. If you are going to suggest that someone use Interlibrary Loan, then explain what it is first. Don't assume knowledge not in evidence. Moreover, make sure to call it Interlibrary Loan first, before referring to it as ILL. The abbreviation is common knowledge to librarians and library staff but may be new to the information seeker.

Another good reminder for teachable moments is "don't just know it, show it." Point to information sources (as one should as a *reference* worker) rather than simply supplying information. If someone asks for the library's hours, don't just give the hours, share the webpage with that information. Instead of only copying the text from an FAQ when responding to chat or email, provide the URL so they can learn to take advantage of the FAQ themselves.

As the RUSA Behavioral Guidelines indicate, "Rather than simply being transactional, library workers can support and enable meaningful, co-created interactions."<sup>4</sup> Reference providers should be mindful of the potential for teachable moments within all interactions and strive to guide users toward greater information literacy abilities whenever possible. This type of approach to using teachable moments may even encourage return visitors and ensure good word-of-mouth promotion of your library's services.

## Endnotes

1. Oakleaf, Megan, and Amy VanScoy. "Instructional Strategies for Digital Reference." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (June 1, 2010): 380–90. <https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.49n4.380>.
2. Renirie, Rebecca Hill. "Instruction through Virtual Reference: Mapping the ACRL Framework." *Reference Services Review* 48, no. 2 (January 10, 2020): 243–57. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-09-2019-0060>.
3. Vogus, Brad. "Examining Virtual Reference Services in Academic Libraries." *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 249–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2020.1818664>.
4. Reference and User Services Association. "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." (2023). <https://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>.