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# Effective Communication for Reference Service Delivery in Academic Libraries

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## Introduction

Communication makes the world habitable. Consciously involves sharing ideas, feelings, thoughts, and many other things that humans share. Ojomo (2004) defined communication as the process of sharing ideas, feelings, thoughts and messages with others. Rothwell (2001) sees communication as a transactional process of sharing meaning with others. Kemoni (2004) citing Ojiambo avers that communication involves the giving and receiving of information, signals or messages by talk, gestures and writing. Odini (1999) identifies communication as one of the core competencies that all information professionals should possess.

Interpersonal communication involves sending and receiving messages between two or more people. DeFleur and Dennis (2002) conceptualized interpersonal communication as a process of using language and non-verbal cues to send and receive messages between individuals that are intended to arouse particular kinds of meaning. Rothwell (2004) posits that interpersonal communication is dyadic communication; according to him, it is a transaction that takes place between two people. Tubbs and Moss (2003) see interpersonal communication as encompassing many kinds of relationships from the most casual to the most long-lasting.

The growth of learning today according to Katz (2002) no longer can be termed gradual. He noted that finding specific bits of data among the mass of undifferentiated information is a great challenge and the reference librarian is in the best position to meet this challenge.

Reference librarians are the image makers for the library and the link between the library, library resources, and library patrons. They are the individuals to ask when a patron does not know who to ask, or need to look for specific information and do not know where to begin. The reference librarian interprets information sources to library users and how to explore them.

## Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the role of communication in effective reference services in academic libraries. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following:

- 1) To examine the duties performed by reference librarians
- 2) To determine the impact of interpersonal communication in reference services.
- 3) To identify barriers to effective interpersonal communication.

## Methodology

Documentary evidences were adopted as the methodology in this paper. Several relevant literature on the role of communication in effective reference services in academic libraries were examined and used as basis for the discussion of the topic.

## Duties of the Reference Librarian

Relationships thrive on the maintenance of a good communication link between the parties involved, the reference librarian is expected to be a good communicator who links library users to the resources of their choice.

The essence of reference work is personal service. The primary function of the reference department as observed by Nwalo (2000) among other things is answering reference questions and user education. Katz (2002) also highlighted the following as some of the duties of a reference librarian:

- To promote an end product: the information sought by the user.
- Teaching people how to find information. Such instructions can range from the individual explanation of information sources or creation of guides and appropriate media to formal assistance.

One of the major ways through which these duties or functions can be performed effectively is through interpersonal communication between the reference librarian and the library user.

Reference librarians engage in person-to-person services. They interact with library patrons and interview them to be able to articulate their information needs clearly. They must possess conversational skills which according to Katz (2002) is the ability to talk to all types of people, to find out what they need. The ability to communicate effectively on an interpersonal level will go a long way in ensuring that they meet the demands of the clientele and also gain their confidence.

Rothwell (2004) notes that communication skills are critical to landing a job, receiving a promotion and performing effectively in the workplace. Skill in interpersonal communication is one of the factors that distinguish a reference librarian. Interpersonal communication in reference services facilitates understanding of users' queries and enhances articulation of answers to users' inquiries.

There is usually interplay of interpersonal, inter-cultural, and interdisciplinary communications that take place during reference services. People from various cultural and professional backgrounds visit the library for various reasons; to consult materials, gather information on various research topics, to find out what the collections of the library is, etc. The likely person they will be directed to is the reference librarian who must be very skillful in communication in order to understand their information needs and be able to meet them. Katz observes that half of the battle in reference and information work is to discover exactly what a reader wants. The implication of this reference librarians is that they must demonstrate a high level of dexterity in interpersonal communication

The reference department serves as a meeting point between the library and its external environment. It is one of the major areas of the library where contact is

made with the public; the reference librarian therefore serves as the contact channel. The effectiveness and efficiency of this contact is premised on the ability of the reference librarian to communicate effectively with the users which in turn promotes the public image of the library and improves library patronage.

## Barriers to Effective Communication in Reference Services

There are several factors that affect the communication process. Kemoni (2004) observed that some of these factors have to do with the sender of messages, others with the receiver or both the sender and receiver. In reference services also, there are some barriers to effective communication. These barriers are as highlighted hereunder:

### Inferiority complex

Self-confidence is important for effective delivery of reference services. Lack of self-confidence makes it difficult for reference librarians to handle difficult questions from supposedly highly knowledgeable clients which in turn make them feel inferior to these groups of users. Inferiority complex arises as a result of low self esteem. Lin (1997) described it as an abnormal or pathological state which due to the tendency of the complex to draw unrelated ideas into itself, leads the individual to deprecate him- or herself to become unduly sensitive, to be too eager for praise and flattery, and to adopt a derogatory attitude towards others. This can affect communication between the reference librarian and the client. A reference librarian who has low self- esteem may perceive the client to have higher qualifications and superior knowledge. A reference librarian who lacks social skills and is withdrawn will not be able to tease out questions from clients and cannot help them to articulate their information needs. This makes the librarian want to quickly dispatch the client to avoid further queries.

### Stereotype

Reference service is about relationship. Stereotyping makes one presumptuous about certain persons, cultures, languages, belief systems. It involves making assumptions about individuals or groups, usually as a result of information that may or may not be true. McKay, Davis, and Fanning (2003) describe stereotyping as a shortcut to forming impression of others. Stereotypes in reference services introduce background noise and interference in communication which makes decoding of queries posed by stereotyped patrons nearly impossible, because the reference librarian has a bias towards such an individual or group. This will adversely affect the quality of reference service such persons would have enjoyed.

### Etiquette and decorum

There are acceptable norms, standards, and official language in relating to others, especially in a corporate setting. These standards enable one show courtesy and mutual respect for others. Showing respect toward patrons allows them to feel honoured and eager to visit the library again. A reference librarian who lacks finesse in language, lacks decorum and good disposition towards the clientele, and whose gestures are demeaning, may not be able to retain users. Patrons will feel ridiculed and resolve to avoiding the reference desk or even locate someone else who will assist them in meeting their information needs.

### Boundaries in relationship

There should be a clearcut demarcation between formal and informal relationships in rendering reference services. Reference librarians should be able to create boundaries in relating with clients not taking undue advantage of them or attempting to project their private needs in an official relationship. Unsolicited comments by the reference librarian should be avoided in order not to send wrong signals that have the ability to irritate the clientele and discourage them from seeking help when information is needed.

### Low level of education

Nwalo (2003) opines that one major step in the reference process is the question clarification process. For reference services to be well delivered, reference librarians must be able to interact at the level of their clientele and answer queries. They must build enough capacity to be able to sustain a high level of communication with clients. Low level of education manifests in diverse ways which include but not limited to lack of capacity to understand user needs and wrong feedbacks as a result of inability to comprehend user requests. It also affects all the other barriers listed above.

### Frustration due to poor working conditions

This is another factor that constitutes a barrier to communication in reference services. If reference librarians are not happy with the system they work for, are not well-motivated, and work without commensurate remuneration, there is a tendency to take it out on clients through transferred aggression. Such librarians might not be attentive to the demands of clients, which may be done deliberately to frustrate the system. The initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian will influence the depth and level of the interaction between the librarian and the patron (Katz, 2002). A reference librarian who is frustrated will not be interested in any conversation, not to talk of trying to understand and meet the information needs of clients.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The importance of communication in rendering effective reference services in a library cannot be overemphasized. It is the bedrock of successful reference service and an avenue for understanding users' queries and meeting their information needs.

Some barriers to effective communication in reference service as identified by this paper include: inferiority complex, stereotype, frustration due to poor working condition, low level of education, boundaries in relationship, etiquette and decorum. To win the confidence of library patrons and ensure their continuous use of the reference library, the paper recommends that the reference librarians should build strong capacity in the area of communication in order to be able to meet their information needs. By so doing, they will be able to help users articulate their information needs, provide answers to their queries, and sustain their patronage.

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