

Reference Interview Transcript and Analysis

INFO 210 – Reference Info Services

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Emily Moss

Setting: The library of a public middle school in the United States during lunchtime.

Actors: 13 year old female student in seventh grade and the school's main librarian

Transaction: Readers' Advisory conversation

Girl approaches the librarian where she's sitting at her desk and says: Can I ask you a question?	RUSA Guidelines 1.1.1 and 1.2.1 – the librarian is in a highly visible physical location and easily identifiable/approachable
The librarian sets down her pen to devote her full attention to the student, smiles, and says: Hello. Of course. What can I help you with?	RUSA Guidelines 1.1.2, 1.1.3, and 1.2.2 – stops all other activities, makes eye contact, and greets patron in a friendly manner
Girl: I read this book called <i>Deenie</i> and it was really good. Are there other books that are kinda like it I could read?	
Librarian (maintaining eye contact): I see. You read <i>Deenie</i> by Judy Blume and you're looking for some books that are similar to it?	RUSA Guidelines 2.1.1, 2.2.1, 2.2.3 – demonstrates interest through attention to patron and signals understanding of query
Girl: Yeah.	
Librarian: May I ask what it is you liked about <i>Deenie</i> ? (Upon the girl's hesitation, adds) I want to make sure I can help you find other books you might like that are similar to it.	RUSA Guidelines 3.1.1, 3.1.7 – communicates in a supportive manner and asks open-ended questions to encourage the patron to expand on the request. RA technique – to discern appeal
Girl: I liked how it was written and how <i>Deenie</i> was like a real girl...like, the books for school don't really feel realistic a lot of times but this was about real life stuff, like how girls really feel about stuff.	Youth RA challenge – “difficulty articulating interest”
Librarian: I think I understand what you're saying. The book felt like a more realistic depiction of a lot of issues facing teen girls than titles that you'd read before or for school? And you want to find other books that do that too, is that right?	RUSA Guidelines 3.1.2, 3.1.3, 3.1.4, 3.1.5 – uses appropriate tone of voice, allows patron to state her need in her own words, identifies the goals of the search, rephrases the request and asks for confirmation to ensure understanding RA Technique – discerning appeal by focusing on how reader “feels” about a book
Girl: Yeah. And I liked the writing too.	
Librarian: Well, the author, Judy Blume, has written quite a few other novels about teenage girls. Would you like me to show them to you? (Upon the girl's nod, the librarian leads her	RUSA Guidelines 4.1.3 and 4.2.1 – explains her strategy to the patron and accompanies the patron in the search by leading her over to the other Judy Blume books.

<p>over to the shelf in the library with Judy Blume's other books including <i>Superfudge</i>, <i>Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret</i>, and <i>Just As Long as We're Together</i>).</p>	<p>YALSA Competencies II.1 – familiarity with developmental needs of young adults to recommend appropriate resources; V.1, V.3 – develop an appropriate collection for young adults, demonstrate a knowledge of literature for and by young adults</p>
<p>Girl: (picks up <i>Are You There, God...</i> and flips through it) I read about one called <i>Forever</i>. Do you have that one?</p>	
<p>Librarian: (knows that <i>Forever</i> was removed from the library 5 years ago because of repeated objections to its content) We actually don't have <i>Forever</i> here. <i>Forever</i> is about a teenage couple though so I could help you find a book with a similar storyline.</p>	<p>YALSA Competencies V.1 and V.3 – demonstrates knowledge of materials and appreciation of literature for and by young people Youth RA challenge – “sensitive materials”</p>
<p>Girl: (now pensive) No, that's ok. (looks back down at <i>Are You There, God</i>)</p>	
<p>Librarian: Would you like me to check if the public library has a copy of <i>Forever</i> for you?</p>	<p>RUSA Guideline 4.1.9 – assists patron in referral to a community resource YALSA Competencies I.2 – demonstrate professional and ethical behavior, VI.3 – provide access to community resources</p>
<p>Girl: Yes. Thanks.</p>	
<p>Librarian: (leads girl back over to her desk and accesses local library's website on her computer) Here is the website for the public library. I'm going to go to the online catalogue here (shows the catalogue tab with her cursor) and see if they have a copy of the book by typing in the title in this search box.</p>	<p>RUSA Guidelines 4.1.3, 4.1.7, 4.1.8 – explains and demonstrates search strategy to patron and displays resources used so that patron can duplicate search on her own in the future YALSA Competencies I.4 - help young adults discover what libraries offer, how to use library resources, and how libraries can assist them, III.3 – effectively promote the library in serving the needs of young adults, VI.4 and VII.5 – instruct in basic information gathering and research skills including electronic resources and how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively</p>
<p>Librarian: (upon seeing the local library has two copies on the shelf) You can see here they have two copies available.</p>	
<p>Girl: Why doesn't this library have it? Since you have other books by her.</p>	
<p>Librarian: Well. Some people felt that it might be too mature for the students of this library.</p>	<p>RUSA Guideline 3.1.2 – uses language appropriate to the patron and nature of the transaction</p>

	RA technique – avoiding jargon
Girl: Oh. Why?	
Librarian: Some of the material could be considered inappropriate. Sometimes if books are challenged, it's decided that they should be removed from the library.	RUSA Guideline 3.1.2 – uses language appropriate to the patron and nature of the transaction RA technique – avoiding jargon
Girl: Are there other books like that? Books that aren't allowed?	
Librarian (hesitates and then...) Yes. There are lists of books that have been banned from schools for a variety of reasons.	
Girl: Oh. Do you have the list?	
Librarian: A group called the American Library Association has published some of the lists on their website. (As she says this, she is opening the ALA website in a new tab on her computer where the girl can see). Here – Banned & Challenged Books. I think if I go to Frequently Challenged Books... yes, here it is. (Hovers over a link for Young Adult Books and then clicks on it).	RUSA Guidelines 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.8 – identifies appropriate sources likely to contain information relevant to patron's query, explains the search strategy to the patron, demonstrates search paths and names of resources so patron can repeat search herself in the future YALSA Competencies I.2 – demonstrate professional and ethical behavior, VI.3 – provide access to specialized information, VI.4 – instruct in basic research skills ALA Code of Ethics Principle II. – uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources
Librarian: (scrolls down to show the girl how long the list is). The Librarian Association made this list from reports from libraries, schools and news stories about books that people have objected to. You can see there are quite a few books on the list including <i>Deenie</i> and <i>Forever</i> .	
Girl: Wow. Can I... is there some way for me to get that list?	
Librarian: (pauses) Yes. I can print it for you if you'd like a copy.	YALSA Competency I.2 – demonstrate professional and ethical behavior
Girl: Yes, thank you.	
Librarian: (prints the web page and hands the print out to the girl) Would you like to check	RUSA Guideline 4.1.10 – asks patron if any other information is needed

out those Judy Blume books we looked at? Or any other books?	
Girl: No, thank you. I'm gonna look at some of these books first (indicating the printed books list). lunch bell rings indicating the beginning of class	
Librarian: If you have any other questions or would like help finding information or locations for any of the books on the list or any others that you think of, please come back and I'll be happy to help you track them down.	RUSA Guideline 5.1.2 – encourages the patron to return if she has any further questions or queries
Girl: Ok. Thank you for your help. (puts printout in her backpack and leaves the library)	

Analysis

In order to demonstrate an effective reference transaction, I wanted to evidence the use of both RUSA Guidelines and the Readers' Advisory techniques of a successful conversation. Additionally, I created a transaction set in a middle school library to address YALSA Competencies and the ethical consideration around censorship, intellectual freedom, and banned or restricted books in school libraries. In the following brief analysis, I'll explore how the above transaction is shaped by these four frameworks – the RUSA Guidelines for a reference interview, techniques of the readers' advisory conversation, YALSA Competencies, and the American Library Association's policy on intellectual freedom through the work of both scholars and practitioners in the field of Library and Information Science.

While I elected to depict a readers' advisory transaction, it's important to note that the fundamental guidelines of an effective reference interview still apply with regard to

- 1) Visibility/Approachability,
- 1) Interest
- 2) Listening/Inquiring

- 3) Searching
- 4) Follow-up

and I've worked to demonstrate their appropriate usage above. Concerning Visibility/Approachability, the librarian is seated at her desk as the most likely space wherein students and other visitors to the library would expect to find her. She also stops her other activities (evidenced through the abandoning of her pen), makes eye contact, and smiles to indicate she is friendly and receptive to assisting the patron with her query. During the beginning of the transaction, she exhibits interest through her full attention to the patron as well as an articulation of her understanding of the nature of their query. To exemplify Listening/Inquiring behaviors, the librarian communicates in a supportive manner, allows the patron to state her information need in her own words, and asks open-ended questions to encourage the patron to expand on her request. Additionally, the librarian identifies the objective of the patron's request (in finding books that are similar to *Deenie*), rephrases the request, and confirms her understanding so that she can best assist the patron in her query. Regarding the search process of the interview, it was important to depict a librarian that not only adheres to the RUSA Searching guidelines in terms of constructing a competent search strategy, identifying appropriate resources, and detailing search paths such that the patron can recreate the search herself in the future but also clearly articulates the steps of her search as she's conducting it. The librarian in this scenario displays the computer screen to her patron, states the names of various websites she visits and uses the full title of the American Library Association to avoid jargon with the patron. This demonstrates Cassell and Hiremath's assertion that "Taking into consideration users' needs and willingness to engage in instruction, librarians should lead users through the process of looking up information rather than simply provide the solution" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p.

6). Finally, the follow-up in a readers' advisory scenario tends to differ somewhat from that of a reference interview but the librarian in this instance, still appropriately exhibited Follow-up Guideline 5.1.2 through her encouragement to return to the library with any future questions or needs. The reference interview behaviors depicted in the above transaction effectively establish a librarian who is capable of developing rapport, demonstrating interest, practicing good listening and inquiring techniques through the asking of open-ended questions and signaling her understanding of a query, constructing a competent and productive search strategy, and encouraging the patron to return to the library should they have additional information needs.

While a reference transaction is primarily shaped by the reference interview, a readers' advisory query is best addressed through the "readers' advisory conversation". It's a subtle but significant semantic distinction in considering how best to approach interaction with patrons based on their information needs. Cassell and Hiremath define "readers' advisory service...[as] the quest to put the right resources in the hands of the right reader" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 7) while Orr expands on the difference between readers' advisory and reference services when she writes that "readers' advisory service is usually about reading for pleasure – entertainment, in other words" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 288). Further, reference services tend to be question-and-answer driven while the goal of a readers' advisory transaction can be far less concrete. In the transaction above, the student is inquiring about recreational reading and in fact, distinguishes her response to this book that she read for pleasure from how she feels about curricular reading. She has approached the librarian looking for new titles to read based on how she felt about the book she initially references, *Deenie*. Her response to what she liked about *Deenie* also addresses Saricks's suggestion that successful readers' advisory transactions rely on identifying "appeal factors" which are defined as "those features that make up the "feel" of the

book- those elements of the work to which the reader relates, such as pacing, characterization, storyline, language, and frame...” (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 290). While the student displays a popular youth readers’ advisory challenge through her difficulty in clearly articulating what it was she liked about *Deenie* (“Readers’ Advisory for Youth”, 2017), significantly she does relay that the main appeal of the book resided not in setting or plot but in the way it made her feel. This kind of description runs the risk of being too vague so the effective readers’ advisory librarian must develop listening and inquiring skills that allow them to discern a reader’s taste.

The skills exhibited by the librarian in the above transaction adhere to a combination of both Youth Readers’ Advisory practices and the Young Adult Library Services Association’s Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth. In keeping with RA practices, it was important to demonstrate that a middle school librarian has awareness of how books make students “feel” and specifically, how Judy Blume’s seminal work affects teen and tween girls. This scenario best shows how the librarian is adhering to Area V. Knowledge of Materials in the YALSA Competencies in that she can “meet the informational and recreational needs of young adults through the development of an appropriate collection...” and “demonstrate a knowledge and appreciation of literature for and by young adults in traditional and emerging formats” (YALSA Competencies, 2010). Additionally, in working with young adults, Harper writes “Readers’ advisory interactions require the librarian to be knowledgeable about current literature, the library’s collection, and the developmental levels of a child to determine the type, format, and content of a resource that will interest the child” (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 305). This suggestion also adheres to YALSA Competency II.1 under Knowledge of Client Group which states “Become familiar with the developmental needs of young adults in order to provide the

most appropriate resources and services" (YALSA Competencies, 2010). Other YALSA Competencies evidenced in the transaction above include that the librarian consistently demonstrates the value and services not just of the school's library but of the library as an institution with her use of the public library's online public access catalogue and the ALA's website (YALSA Competencies I.4, III.3). The utilization of these resources highlights the provision of access to specialized information as well as the use of technology or electronic resources in information searching. Finally, her repeated demonstration of Competency I.2 as the practice of professional and ethical behavior aligns with the ALA's Code of Ethics and signifies the ethical considerations in this particular transaction.

The American Library Association's Code of Ethics states that "[librarians] uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources" (ALA Code of Ethics, 2008). This imperative is so central to the practice of librarianship that the ALA has a dedicated Office for Intellectual Freedom that among many other things, brings public attention to ideas of intellectual freedom and censorship through their annually sponsored Banned Books Week. The ALA also features a special Banned & Challenged Books section within their official website. However, while it might be the principle of librarians to ensure that patrons and students maintain the freedom to read and access all resources, books are still being challenged and banned in various school districts across the country. In her article exploring why certain books are challenged in schools entitled "Where is Judy Blume: Controversial fiction for older children and young adults", Ann Curry compiled quantitative data regarding the reasons books were challenged and the number of times that reason was cited in the challenges. For example, profanity was cited 69 times across the 220 titles that were challenged in schools and public libraries in the U.S. and Canada from 1984-1999. Heterosexual activity was the second most

commonly cited reason for challenging a book with 48 complaints but if the numbers of complaints about heterosexual activity, homosexual activity, and sexual activity deemed immoral/illegal are combined, “the total of 135 of 399 objections (34 percent) reveals the dominance of sexually focused reasons [for challenge]” (Curry, 2001, p.32). In the Appendix of Curry’s study, the 220 titles and their reasons for challenge are listed. *Deenie* is included for “immorality of masturbation” and *Forever* is included for “objectionable language, masturbation, birth control, explicit sex scenes, premarital sex”; “too mature for readers”; “book is thoroughly immoral” (Curry, 2001, p. 34). While the librarian is obligated to remain neutral on subject matter, oppose censorship on principle, and advocate for intellectual freedom, the Texas American Civil Liberties Union’s report on challenged and banned books in Texas public schools from 2008 to 2009 found that “only 3% of school districts [27 of 786 surveyed] give librarians sole discretion in reviewing challenges” (“Free People Read Freely...”, 2009, p. 102). 61% of school districts reported the appointment of a committee composed of teachers, librarians, district administrators, and in some cases, parents and teachers to review the book challenges while 18% give the school board the authority to decide the fate of challenged books. Of the books challenged in Texas public schools, 27% were banned outright while 28% were retained. 22% had their use restricted usually requiring parental permission to access the material. Like Curry’s study, the ACLU report found that sexual content or nudity was the dominant reason for challenging a book. In one year 60 books were challenged with this as the cited reason and of those 60, 17 were banned, 17 were retained, and 14 were set for restricted use. These statistics inform the transaction above wherein *Deenie* remains in the library but *Forever* has been removed. Upon receiving the questions from the student about banned books, the librarian could’ve glossed over the topic of banned books and instead highlighted all the

books that are available in their library collection. Instead, she elects to broach the subject of banned books with the student and put it in the context of an official library organization through her use of the ALA website. Additionally, she pauses before offering to see if *Forever* is available in the public library given that it was banned from the school library but ultimately decides toward advocacy of intellectual freedom, to assist the student in finding a copy of the specific book about which she inquired. While a school librarian is required to uphold the mission and policies of her parent organization as well as demonstrate discretion with sensitive materials in dealing with young adults, this librarian doesn't outright challenge rules or supply contraband material within her library but she does acknowledge the topic and controversy around banned books as well as assist the student in locating a specific book in alignment with readers' advisory services.

References

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