We are all reference librarians

Using communication to employ a philosophy of access for catalogers

by Amy L. Carver

W hat makes a good cataloger? This is a topic that has been discussed at great length among librarians on the AUTOCAT electronic list and in the literature. A theme that has emerged from these discussions is the need for catalogers to be responsive to patron needs and expectations regarding access in the catalog. This theme seems very straightforward and logical, yet many catalogers remain more focused on the rules and national standards than on access, to the detriment of library patrons.

In my time as a catalog librarian, first at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law and now at Montana State University (MSU)—Bozeman, I have begun to develop a philosophy of cataloging that may best be articulated as "we are all reference librarians." Catalogers serve as reference librarians for other library staff when questions or concerns about the library catalog arise. Maintaining a high-quality catalog indirectly serves patrons.

Christian Boissonnas has been quoted as saying that for catalogers, "absence of relevance to users is harmful."[1] The work of catalogers appears not to have a direct impact on patrons; however, a quality catalog is the library's most important reference tool and effective reference depends upon it.[2] If access points are incorrect or incomplete, library materials become essentially impossible to find.

Catalogers at the reference desk

Catalogers often do not interact directly with patrons and thereby miss valuable lessons about how patrons use the catalog and the collection. How do we give catalogers that sense of relevance to users? The first way that comes to mind is to have the cataloger work the reference desk. This can be a very valuable way to use a cataloger's knowledge of the collection and may help in building good working relationships with reference librarians.

There are many possible positive results that may occur with such an arrangement. The reference librarians learn more about the classification scheme used in the library, subject headings, or MARC field indexing and the integrated library system's capabilities. The catalogers learn the weaknesses of the catalog and that patrons search for materials very differently from themselves. The arrangement provides an opportunity for librarians to point out errors in the online catalog directly to the catalogers.[3] In addition, the working relationships between the reference librarians and the cataloger may improve.

There are possible negatives as well. The catalogers will likely have less time to devote to their cataloging duties. Catalogers may not enjoy the public interaction of the reference desk, and if the assignment is not voluntary

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it would be "counterproductive and demoralizing to force 'square pegs into round holes.'"[4] Do the positives outweigh the possible negatives? The answer to this question will vary from library to library, although this approach does work quite well in many situations. What do you do if such an arrangement is not desirable or feasible in your library?

Communication is key

Communication and sharing expertise are critical to achieving the fundamental mission of the library and providing patrons access to information and library materials. Open lines of communication between catalogers and reference librarians are essential to capitalize fully on this mission. One very effective way to improve communication is to open reference meetings to catalogers and other technical services librarians, and to open technical services meetings to reference librarians. Many of the topics covered in each arena are of interest to the other librarians.

When I began working at the MSU Libraries, I was given the opportunity to attend the reference team meetings. I took advantage of this opportunity and have found it very helpful in building working relationships with the individual reference librarians. My attendance at these meetings showed the reference librarians that I was interested in the concerns that they raised, allowed me to be on hand to answer questions regarding the online catalog, and gave me great insight into what they felt were the prime concerns of patrons. This has enabled me to capitalize on the excellent relationship between reference and cataloging that existed before my arrival.

One change that I was instrumental in initiating was including a reference representative at the technical services meetings. When making decisions in our technical services meetings about such things as the wording of local notes or the most useful subdivisions to use, having a reference librarian on hand is dramatically faster and provides us with valuable insight into how our patrons are using the catalog. This insight is critical in providing "relevance to users."

In both cases, the decision-making process is more clearly articulated and is less of a mystery to the other side. There is less surprise and the feelings that decisions and/or

> **One very effective way to improve communication is to open reference meetings to catalogers and other technical services librarians, and to open technical services meetings to reference librarians.**

changes are being forced upon the other group are lessened. By involving the reference librarians in the discussion from the beginning it is less likely that there will be ideas suggested that are not feasible from the cataloging and integrated library system standpoint. Nothing is more frustrating for reference librarians than expending a considerable amount of time and energy on how to handle a new resource or on the need for a new location code in the catalog, only to have the catalogers say it is not possible. Often the result of such a scenario is resentment on both sides.

Sometimes there may be feelings that the catalogers just do not want to do the work, but that may not be the case at all. The integrated library system software may not allow what is being proposed. Or the change may be physically possible, but in order for it to occur, the proposal must go through an approval process, particularly in the situation of a shared catalog. The catalogers have an in-depth understanding of the data in the catalog and the database structure of the integrated library system. With early involvement and a mutually respectful dialogue much frustration can be avoided.[5] When discussing what and how information displays in the OPAC it is essential for the catalogers to work closely with the reference librarians.

Another communication tool implemented successfully at the MSU Libraries was the creation of a forum on our staff Intranet where errors, problems, or questions about the online catalog can be posted. The postings are automatically e-mailed to catalogers for action. This allows the reference librarians to post a message when they find something of concern. Reference librarians do not have to leave the reference desk or remember the problem at the end of their shifts in order to

report their concern. When the item is resolved, a message is posted to inform reference that the problem has been resolved. Most problems are resolved the same day, or within a day or two for more complex problems.

Communication can be aided by focusing on the strengths that the catalogers and reference librarians possess. It may appear at times that catalogers and reference librarians speak different languages because the duties each performs daily vary widely.[6] It is important to keep in mind that some of the traits that cause frustration are also the traits that can make each librarian very good at his or her job.

Attention to excruciating detail is one example. Catalogers are expected to pay attention to the smallest details, such as punctuation and spacing in the bibliographic records. Many reference librarians see the bigger picture and often find problem records in the catalog or see how a single change can have far-reaching access implications. By relying on the expertise of reference colleagues and trusting them to find areas that need improvement, catalogers can focus on the details. The reference librarians, in turn, need to trust catalogers to code the bibliographic records correctly so that the correct information will display as desired in the OPAC.

A good cataloger will be able to translate the rules, will know the limitations of the library software package in use, and should share this information with the reference librarians. Conversely, reference librarians have daily contact with the patrons using the public catalog and should be given the opportunity to discuss it and the needs of the patrons openly. It is critical to understand what the other side does in order to assist in achieving common goals.[7]

The patron's perspective

What do patrons think when looking at the OPAC display? Are all notes critical for patrons to see? Not all information that is contained in a MARC bibliographic record is really needed by the public most of the time. Some elements, such as frequency, are more useful for staff in terms of tracking and record keeping. That is not to say that catalogers should not create full and complete bibliographic records, but rather that there needs to be discussion between reference and cataloging teams and individuals in determining what fields are displayed to the public and in what order.

Should the URL follow the title field in the OPAC? How will library patrons be best able to find and utilize the information presented? These questions require input from reference librarians in order for the library to best serve patrons. If territorial feelings are allowed, the patrons will not be served. As a cataloger, I may feel that when I create an original bibliographic record, I have included the most critical and helpful information and that all of that information should be given to the patrons in the online catalog. Reference librarians may see patrons confused and overwhelmed by the complete bibliographic record and want the default display for the catalog to be a pared down version that is more straightforward and concise. This situation is likely to cause dissension between catalogers and reference librarians. With communication and agreement that the patron's needs are the primary concern, the result will be a more user-friendly and understandable online catalog.

When both reference librarians and catalogers focus on serving patrons by communicating and working together the benefits are great.

What makes a good cataloger? It is advisable for reference librarians to consider this question and share their answers with the catalogers with whom they work. Both parties will benefit and so will the patrons.

Notes

1. Kim Clarke, "Technical Services: the OTHER Reader Service," *Library Collections, Acquisitions & Technical Services* 24 (2000) p. 501–502.

2. Dilys E. Morris and Gregory Wool, "Cataloging: Librarianship's Best Bargain," *Library Journal* June 15, 1999, p. 44–46.

3. Bonnie E. Johnson, "Crossing the Line: A Cataloger goes Public," *The Reference Librarian* 59 (1997) p. 147–153.

4. Ibid.

5. Sharon L. Walbridge, "New Partnerships Within the Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 15 no. 2 (1991) p. 61–72.

6. Elizabeth Futas, "Current Issues in Reference and Adult Services," *RQ* 28 (Winter 1988) p. 141–145.

7. Ibid. ■

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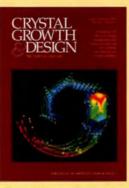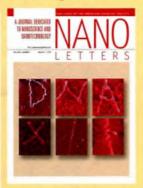
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