

To Be a Librarian: Accessing Information in the Computer Age or, Service With a Smile

InULA Scholarship Application Essay by Sharon Griffith

A petite and retiring young woman spoke with a marked but elegant accent as she peeked around my open office door and hesitantly asked if I could help her. I knew it could be difficult for people to approach me in the office for help; yet in our small often one-staff office, it was necessary to work in the glassed-in office and hope that signage would draw people in if they needed help--a less than ideal situation, and one that requires extra effort to convey a service attitude. In this instance I hoped to overcome the reluctance with an immediate welcome. The young woman needed to take a CD-ROM-based self-analysis test in the library and was unfamiliar with computers, the extent of which I admit underestimating at first.

When we had navigated the menu of the program and Jane was beginning to fill in her name on the online form, I briefly instructed her how to finish the form and click the "next" button. Then I moved out to the circulation counter to sign out a video to an instructor, answer the phone, and check out a TV/VCR cart. When I returned to my desk, I could see that Jane was still stuck on the same screen, and realized that though Jane seemed to be approaching her task with courage and intelligence, she was reluctant to ask for help. She needed someone to be attentive to her progress and coach her through obstacles like which mouse button to click. I felt really pulled. I should go back and finish the cataloging that I was supposed to complete by morning. Still, she was stuck on that same screen?

Accessing information has been an important part of my life, first as a student/learner, then as a teacher, recently as a copy editor (checking facts and reference styles), currently as a library assistant and MLS student; all the way from books and card catalogs alone, to main frames, personal computers, the Internet, and all that the information/technology explosion has brought to the library world.

Instead of being the old dog who can't learn new tricks, I have embraced the changes as they've come, even though the computer age, by its very nature, requires not only learning entirely new tricks, but RE-learning newer and newer and newer tricks. Throughout the process, I have seen a few of my peers come along with me, but many more have chosen to remain in the familiar kennel, finding new ways too threatening, and missing out on the wonderful benefits, convenience, and life enriching discoveries to be found in the world of information just waiting for them outside their comfort zone. I would like to be one of those who take an active role in encouraging the reluctant to reach out, and discover that special world.

I'm convinced library science is the career for me because of its very nature as an ever-changing discipline. With currently significant roots in the past, as well as an investment in the future

development of technology, this is a field with endless avenues to explore, where one can never quite "arrive" because there will always be more to learn (or grow with) tomorrow. Having spent forty-eight years taking this approach to life personally, I hope to spend the future growing with library science.

My college years were spent exploring the fields of English (student teaching literature at the secondary level), and Social Work in graduate school. I applied this education, not in the public workplace, but in teaching children for 15 years. Experiences during that time (leading writing clubs, publishing student newspapers, organizing and leading a Spanish class, managing a basketball program) have contributed to my desire to study library science. Recent experience as a library assistant in a small two-year college library has given me an opportunity to apply that study on the job with people of various ages and cultures (even international cultures), and has convinced me that to serve as a reference librarian with an emphasis on bibliographic instruction would be the best way I could imagine to continue my life story. I want to teach general computer use (online catalog access, Windows 98 (and up), word processing, and Internet use), and research skills, as well as contribute to making computer access to information as user-friendly as possible. [See my web site for developing mouse skills as an example: <http://members.xoom.com/TypeRight/>.] I believe that assisting library users to find the information that they "want" to find (have a need for), and acquire the skills they need to find it, is a stimulus to real learning, and thus an encouragement to become self-motivated, lifelong learners.

Though perhaps a common theme in philosophies of librarianship, I maintain that an attitude of service to the public is the single most important idea in librarianship and is the supporting framework to everything else I hope to accomplish in that profession. Every class experience encountered in my one-and-a-half semesters in IU's SLIS program has inspired and reinforced this belief. Dr. Jean Umiker-Sebeok encouraged me to evaluate my work setting from the perspective of meeting user needs. Dr. Joyce Taylor gave me a wonderful introduction to the field of reference work (with exemplary modeling of the service attitude). Dr. Debora Shaw challenged me to understand the theory behind the organization of knowledge and information, the basis of service. Vickie Schlene presented library management perspectives, encouraging the entire class to a profitable brainstorming session on the meaning of libraries and librarianship. All of these reinforced for me the idea of the importance of service.

Recently I found ALA's Draft Statement of Core Values a perfect elaboration of that service attitude. Made real to me by recent encounters with students from Chile and Kenya, dropped into my life by their need for assistance in the small Hoosier community college library where I work, these values exemplify my philosophy of library service:

- **The connection of people to ideas** (even if it means loaning personal Spanish-English dictionaries to a student from Chile trying to make sense of her schoolwork, and revising her mental model about how librarians can help with resources on the Internet, not just with books);
- **Unfettered access to ideas** (when it means assisting a newly arrived student from Kenya evacuated after the US Embassy bombing where she had worked to help those hurting in the war take a computerized personality test (a class assignment) with no existing

computer skills; or helping any of the many others who come with research needs and limited computer skills, regardless of age, culture, or financial resources and thus promoting democracy in America by equalizing access to information for all) ;

- **Learning in all its contexts** (when it means meeting with a class to assist with a specific research project then discovering that learning about the online library resources is a higher priority; or "babysitting" another instructor's child by helping her explore the World Wide Web for fun);
- **Freedom for all people to form, to hold, and to express their own beliefs** (when it means explaining how to access Web sites on topics I personally disagree with, and teach others how to build Web sites that express their beliefs);
- **Respect for the individual person** (when it means searching for the source of a quote an older student wants to use in his paper "without giving up" in spite of my personal aversion to strong tobacco odor);
- **Preservation of the human record** (when it means something as simple as trying to expand our history collection for students who have been seeking material for American history projects);
- **Interdependence among information professionals and agencies** (when it means learning to get along with those of even *more* technical sophistication than you, who tend to treat your attempts, and needs, with disdain); and
- **Professionalism in service to these values** (when it means providing extensive follow-up on CD installation and printing difficulties that interrupted an arrogant professor's class demonstration of a computer program in the library even if you are *not* subsequently presented with that professor's verbal and written (email) appreciation of your "professionalism" a nice surprise in this case).

My preferred setting for applying these core values remains unknown, pursuant of more exploration of the possibilities. The academic reference setting may remain near the top of the list, if I can be assured of being able to work with people of a wide range of ages and interests. I have a special interest in seniors and others likely to be reluctant to tackle computers, but am finding, surprisingly, that many "young folks" at the community college level fit that description. But whoever, and wherever, the goal is service.

I had some limited library experience many years ago. Between college and graduate school, I worked in the State Law Library in Austin, Texas. This was so long ago, that any particular filing/shelving skills (typing catalog cards, for example), or reference tools learned are completely obsolete/irrelevant today; but the experience of successfully assisting patrons find what they were looking for to solve a particular problem, is one that still motivates me twenty-five years later. Add to that the possibility today of getting people connected to the vast amount of information available at the touch of a few computer keys, and then helping them narrow their search to find what might answer a question, solve a problem, or inspire a life interest or hobby and I have found something that is of great and lasting interest to me as a profession.

Jane was still stuck on that same screen, and I remembered the first principle of librarianship service. I returned to Jane. Following through to the end and getting the information she needed for her instructor took extra time and delayed my closing , but then I was rewarded with a remarkable story of Jane's recent

evacuation to the United States, a bonus that expanded my perception of the world a notch or two. The cataloging will be there tomorrow and so will she, this time working on her own.

Bring on the computer phobes!!! I'll be ready.

Work Cited

ALA Core Values Task Force. "Draft Statement (11/21/99)." 9 December 99. <http://www.ala.org/congress/corevalues/draft.html>