Beyond Efficient Answers with a Smile: Seeking Critical Reference Praxis

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Like reference work, praxis relies on continual reciprocity and exchange; a dialogue. In praxis, the non-exclusive categories of theory, practice, and reflection overlap, intermingle, and mutually inform one another to result in critical action and contributing to a better understanding of the world and how it might be changed. Praxis is iterative and ongoing, and can be defined as the "process of applying theory through practice to develop more informed theory and practice, specifically as it relates to social change."[1] It is a component vital to identifying and interrupting the structures of domination and privilege we exist within, structures which are positioned as natural through hegemony. As David James Hudson observes, it is necessary that we problematize the strict delineations between theory, practice, and praxis itself, considering that "theory is material, theory is action, theory is practice," and to ignore the materiality of scholarship is to misapprehend it and the lived experiences it entails.[2] Hudson further argues that

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1   John J. Doherty, "Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?" *Progressive Librarian* 26 (Winter 2005/2006): 11.

2   David James Hudson, "The Whiteness of Practicality," in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 226.

"critical work is always a practice of translation," dependent on the various environments we inhabit.[3] Each chapter in this section delves into different conceptual frames and inspirations, offering new insights and acts of translation for informing reference work and successfully blurring the arbitrary lines that separate theory, practice, and reflection.

Much of the scholarly discussion concerning reference has focused upon whether library users take advantage of reference services. A great deal of hand-wringing has taken place over a decline in the number of "transactions" recorded in libraries across the United States, and when reference is not lamented as a waste of librarians' time or criticized for being cost-ineffective, it has in various accounts been subjected to transformation, met with dismissal, or sentenced to death. At best, different models of reference are considered, as though the answer to meaningful reference work lies simply in finding the "correct" model to be applied.

What so much of this existing discussion has failed to account for, and what the authors in this section accomplish so fully, is an examination of the reference worker's role, as laborer, interlocutor, and contributor to an ongoing reference dialogue occurring within libraries that often repeats itself, accumulates over time, and, sometimes, opens up unforeseen possibilities for librarians and patrons alike. A focus on the relational dynamics between reference worker and patron is particularly useful considering the identity of the library user is often constructed in ways that "[do] not necessarily liberate the user from the constraints of the system, and for both librarians and users, there is no easy way out of the web of discursive power."[4] The library is a place with unique potential, but it acts to reproduce systems of domination in ways similar to any other institution. The sooner we realize there is no existing outside of these systems, the better.

Critical self-reflection upon our work and the relational nature of reference is crucial in ensuring it reflects both the needs of patrons and our social justice goals as library workers. As Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro note, within reference work "communication is always imbued with power dynamics, which are shaped by racialized identity and cultural practices. Library staff, however, are typically not

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3   Ibid, 227.

4   Kimmo Tuominen, "User-Centered Discourse: An Analysis of the Subject Positions of the User and the Librarian," *The Library Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1997): 367.

asked to be cognizant of these dynamics."[5] Recent work such as Brook et al.'s as well as new collections have already begun to take up these efforts, most notably *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations*.[6] The specific ways that patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, and ableism function and are reproduced among various sites of library work are increasingly being described and made visible. Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, for example, describe the experiences of women of color librarians with the reference desk as a focal point, while April Hathcock and Stephanie Sendaula show how racial microaggressions are directed at librarians of color at the reference desk.[7] Considering two recent titles that examine race and gender in libraries, *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* and *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, it is clear that the "pink-collar immaterial labor" of librarianship is continuing to be interrogated along with interlocking systems of oppression.[8] As Fobazi Ettarh writes regarding librarianship and intersectionality, "When librarianship is viewed through a single-axis that is reflective of the dominant culture, certain values, such as individualism and assertiveness color the advice and practices deemed acceptable."[9] It is only through apprehending these multiple axes that hegemony can be challenged.

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5   Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro, "In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing Whiteness in the Academic Library," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 269.

6   Maria Accardi, ed., *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017).

7   Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, "Intersectionality at the Reference Desk: Lived Experiences of Women of Color Librarians," in *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations*, ed. Maria T. Accardi (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 225–252; April M. Hathcock and Stephanie Sendaula, "Mapping Whiteness at the Reference Desk," in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 247–56.

8   Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, eds., *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018); Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017); Lisa Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645.

9   Fobazi Ettarh, "Making a New Table: Intersectional Librarianship," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2014).

The university I work at, which is made up predominantly of students of color, has seen increased activism in the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Students are responding to the hateful rhetoric and policies of the current administration by organizing in and outside of the university, participating in rallies, conducting panels, and petitioning to have the university recognized as a sanctuary campus. This growth in political organizing is heartening to see at a school not particularly known for its activism. The reference desk has been one place for these students to drop off flyers, update librarians on their organizing efforts, and ask about possibilities for sponsorship of their events. Reference, of course, has always been well-suited to this type of informational exchange. What has changed in the last few months is an increased solidarity with student activists, working to shape the university and their world. As a public place that encourages impromptu conversations and helps us maintain the enthusiasm that is so important to creating change, I am glad our reference desk allows us to connect with students and discuss not just immediate needs, but our greater hopes and goals moving forward.

The most valuable aspects of reference may be creating friction in the teflon tunnel of the neoliberal university and world at large, as Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski phrase it.[10] Reference is a space where we are less likely to assess or be assessed, and where relating with other people and exercising compassion is key. As we are demanded to demonstrate our value and prove our contributions, perhaps the most useful thing reference workers can do is embrace the fleeting and unexpected nature of reference. Let's use our positions in reference to foster solidarity with our patrons and create meaningful connections. Most significantly of all, let's use our time and energy to give attention to and care for others, in a time when care is an uncommon, essential, and radical act.

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10   Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski, "The Public Academic Library: Friction in the Teflon Tunnel," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, ed. Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 275–96.

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