



## Reference Services, Scalability, and the Starfish Problem

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Here's a familiar inspirational story: A man is walking on the beach, and discovers thousands of starfish, stranded and dying above the waterline. There are far more than he can possibly hope to rescue on his own, but he begins, implacably, to pick them up one at a time and throw them as far as he can back into the water.

Soon another man comes along and sees what he's doing. He watches for a while and then says, "You know, there are too many of them. It's not going to make any difference."

The first man looks down at the starfish in his hand and responds, "It makes a difference to this one."

The moral of the story is that even if our individual efforts can't change everything, they can change something, and each of us can make a great difference to other individuals who need our help.

It's a wonderful analogy, but it depends for its power on one important but unspoken assumption: the man in the story is a volunteer, helping starfish on his own time. If he were employed by the state to solve the problem of starfish getting stranded on the beach, and he were going about his assignment by throwing them back one by one, then the story wouldn't be an illustration of praiseworthy altruism. It would be an illustration of incompetence, and the man should be fired.

One of the dangerous things about being a librarian is the opportunity it gives us to help people. I realize that sounds crazy, so let me explain: This morning I was on my way to a meeting. As I hurried down the hall, I noticed a student looking confused and sort of wandering in a circle near the book stacks. Although I was running a little bit late, I couldn't stand to pass her by without offering some help, so I asked if she needed a hand. It turned out that she was having a hard time figuring out the call number she had written down — she was confused by the decimal places, and had ended up in the wrong section of shelving. ("These numbers are so confusing," she muttered at one point.) It took us a few minutes to get everything straightened out, but I finally got her to the right place and she found her book and thanked me profusely.

I continued on to my meeting with a spring in my step. I had really helped someone, and she had really appreciated it, and life was good. But the man with the starfish kept coming into my mind and making me feel uneasy.

Why? Because one major area of traditional librarianship — reference service — is built on a fundamentally flawed model, and it's a model that reinforces itself by making us feel good when we implement it. We sit at desks or encounter patrons

in the stacks, and we interact with our users one-on-one. Most of those interactions are quick and shallow, and amount to directional help, and the more such interactions we have with patrons the more uneasy we get. If you spend an hour telling people where the bathrooms are, you're inevitably going to start asking yourself uncomfortable questions about whether your time is being well spent. But then a patron approaches with a deep and involved research problem, and he draws on your expertise in gratifying ways, and sometimes the help you give makes a very large (maybe even a life-changing) impact. You feel wonderful after these experiences. "This is what librarianship is all about!" you say to herself. And so you continue doing it, and you get better and better at it, and you train others to do it well also.

And the more we do it, the better we feel, and the less inclined we are to address the bigger, more intractable problem: the fact that this model of patron service leaves the vast majority of our patrons unserved. The calculus is cruel but undeniable: fifteen minutes spent by one librarian helping one patron gives a miserable return on the money spent by the librarian's employer — an investment that is intended to help thousands and thousands of patrons. For every library user that comes to our reference desks or tugs on our sleeves in the stacks, there are hundreds or even thousands who have similar needs and never get any help at all. I know for a fact that this bothers many of us, but I don't think it bothers most of us nearly as much as it should.

To me, what felt like the key moment in my interaction with a library patron this morning was the moment that she found the book and thanked me effusively. I had helped her find her book! She was thrilled! Both of us were happy! And if I had been a volunteer looking for a way to be of help to someone, I'd be absolutely right to feel wonderful about what I'd done. But I'm not a volunteer, and I wasn't investing my own time. I'm being paid to help 28,000 students, and I was investing my employer's time.

Should I have declined to help her? Of course not. But it's important to think clearly about the significance of our interaction. The key moment did not come when we found the book and she thanked me for all my fine help. Rather, it came when she muttered "These numbers are so confusing." The crux of her problem lay in the fact that LC call numbers look like gibberish to most normal people, and that libraries themselves are still, despite our ongoing efforts, very difficult to use. I'd be willing to bet money that a very large number of the 28,000 students my library serves find LC call numbers just as confusing as she did,

and I can promise you that most of them will never have the kind of interaction with a librarian that she had with me. This isn't because we librarians aren't willing to have those conversations, or aren't good at having those conversations, but simply because there are too many of them and too few of us. In an academic or large public library, traditional reference service is simply not scalable to the size of the patron population that needs our help.

Again: am I suggesting that we stop offering one-on-one service to our patrons? Absolutely not. As long as patrons keep coming to our reference desks, there need to be people there waiting to help them. But in the short run, I believe we need to think long and hard about how that kind of service should fit into our libraries' structures, and what we're going to do about the fact that it's available to so few of the people we serve. In the long run, we should be trying to put our reference desks out of business. We need to design our services so that they serve ALL of our patrons well — not just the small minority of patrons we are able to interact with one-on-one. To some degree we do this already when we shift print resources to online, and when we provide online help, and when we figure out ways to make access more intuitive so that patrons can get what they need without having to find someone to help them.

But I think we can (and must) do more. We need to radically rethink the catalog, and make it simpler — less exhaustively complete, less painstakingly accurate, more timely and more user-friendly — so that patrons actually need less help. We need to embrace federated searching, and figure out ways to make it much better than the current state of the art. We should take a very hardheaded look at how time is spent on reference desks, especially by highly-paid, expensively-trained librarians. How many patrons does a librarian actually get to help in a typical hour of desk time? Couldn't that hour be more fruitfully spent in front of a class somewhere else on campus, or consulting with a professor or a department head on ways to better integrate library services with the curriculum? If the vast majority of questions fielded at a reference desk are directional or otherwise routine, doesn't it make sense to staff the desk with less expensive and less expert personnel, who can refer patrons to librarians as needed? Please note that none of this is to question the value of reference librarians — on the contrary, it's the very high value of reference librarians that makes me question traditional reference service. In other words, what I'm questioning is whether we're using reference librarians the right way and whether our patrons are getting the tremendous benefits that reference librarians can offer.

The root of my patron's problem lay in the fact that the library is hard to use. I helped her find a book, but I didn't solve her problem — even if it seemed to both of us like I did. The problem with traditional reference service is that it isn't scalable, and the solution to that problem does not lie in improving or expanding reference service, but rather in making traditional reference service less necessary. If only it didn't feel so good to provide traditional reference services, we might be more motivated to try harder to put our desks out of business. 🐞