

## **I don't know what I want, but I want you to help me: healing the relationship between artists and reference librarians**

*"Lack of sympathy toward the library user can make even the most knowledgeable reference librarian ineffective."*

*-Michael Gorman<sup>1</sup>*

Artists have been referred to in information studies literature as “ghosts” and “neglected patrons.”<sup>2,3</sup> Often because they have needs that are difficult to define and may be less skilled at articulating these needs. Nearly every article published on the topic calls for further research into the informational needs and behaviors of artists. This lack of literature is striking when compared to the significant proportion of the population that engage in artistic activities. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, artists make up 1.4% of the workforce in America—a larger percentage than those in the legal, medicine, and agriculture combined.<sup>4</sup> It would be unimaginable to neglect the informational needs of these other more visibly cohesive groups.

Artists are certainly not the only underserved population among library clients or the general public. However, they do provide an interesting case study in how presuppositions about how and why people seek information can disadvantage those who do not fit the mold. Artists provide an opportunity to examine an

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gorman, “Values for human-to-human reference,” *Library Trends* 50, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 168-182.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Oddos, “Un fantôme dans votre bibliothèque: l’artiste face à la bibliothèque d’art, du besoin d’information au besoin de reconnaissance” (“A ghost in your library: the artist’s relationship with the art library from the need for information to the need for recognition”), *Art Libraries Journal* 23, no. 1 (1998): 13-21.

<sup>3</sup> Laurel Littrell, “Artists: The neglected patrons?,” in *Crossing the Divide: Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries March 15-18, 2001, Denver, Colorado*, vol. 2001 (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001), 291-4, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/events/pdf/littrell.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Artists in the Workforce*, Executive Summary (National Endowment for the Arts, 2005), [http://arts.gov/research/ArtistsInWorkforce\\_ExecSum.pdf](http://arts.gov/research/ArtistsInWorkforce_ExecSum.pdf).

underserved group that spans all types of socioeconomic identities, but its members still share in a community of practice.

Because the library is an extremely structured information environment with rules and systems clients must navigate, those clients whose information behaviors don't fall within the profession's recognition are frequently seen as nuisances rather than opportunities for professional growth. New theories of professionalism and knowledge creation may pave the way for greater understanding of why these clients go underserved. However, to remedy past mistakes with underserved groups, reference librarians will need to place extra emphasis on building trusting, equitable relationships with these clients. Revising the traditional power structure of the reference librarian-client relationship where the librarian is an expert and the client is a novice may be necessary to reopen the type of communication Samuel Green envisioned over a century ago. This essay investigates how reimagining the role of the reference librarian as a primarily interpersonal relationship has the potential to change how the library interacts with one type of underserved clients: artists.

First, we will discuss a predominant theory of the nature of professions and of information seeking. Next we will explore how these traditional models hinder effective service to artists both in information systems and in the reference interview. This discussion will be followed by an examination of the information needs of artists and the importance of social structures in meeting these needs. Finally, a new model of interpersonal interaction in the form of Stover's "librarian as

non-expert” will be discussed and guidelines for applying such a model to relationships with artists will be given.<sup>5</sup>

## **1. Models of reference librarianship**

### *1.1 Models of the librarian*

Very few librarians of any focus would deny they view the field of librarianship as a profession. The requirement of graduate education, the shared knowledge of information systems, and the encouragement of ongoing career development all point to the acceptance of librarians as professionals from within the field even if not acknowledged from without. Once conceiving of the field as a profession, we must consider how this view effects the services we provide. Schön defines a prevailing view of a profession as follows:

According to the model of Technical Rationality—the view of professional knowledge which has most powerfully shaped both our thinking about professions and the institutional relations of research, education, and practice—professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike law, medicine, or engineering, librarianship could be considered a minor profession in that it largely draws from the literature of other fields to conduct

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Stover, “The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise,” *The Reference Librarian* 42, no. 87 (2004): 273 - 300, [http://www.informaworld.com/10.1300/J120v42n87\\_10](http://www.informaworld.com/10.1300/J120v42n87_10).

<sup>6</sup> Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 21.

research and develop technical practice.<sup>7</sup> However, it does share many similarities to the major professions, primarily a shared and specialized knowledge-base.

Though there is some debate as to the validity of a knowledge base for librarianship,<sup>8</sup> it does seem that librarians require a certain amount of specialized skills and knowledge to effectively accomplish the library's goals. These, however, may be difficult to pin down to a well-defined list, but it is clear librarians need skills "in evaluating, classifying and retrieving information" as well as the ability to navigate among the available information, information systems, and information-seekers.<sup>9</sup> The value of a profession, such as librarianship, is that the professional is able to translate research into more effective means of problem solving in real-world situations.

The model of librarian as expert, while useful for advocating proper training, can be problematic for the overarching institutional goal of provided excellent information access to users. One problem with the Technical Rationality view of professionalism is its dependence on standardized and measurable results (e.g. number of patients healed). Within reference librarianship, this leads to evaluation standards that are based on efficiency and effectiveness in answering factual questions.<sup>10</sup> Radford offers the criticism that, "From this perspective, the user becomes little more than the yard- stick against which one can determine the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>8</sup> Stover, "The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise," 278.

<sup>9</sup> Stover, "The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise." 279.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrick Lancaster, *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library...*, 2nd ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).;F. Benham and Ronald Powell, *Success in Answering Reference Questions: Two Studies* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987).;Thomas Childers, "The Quality of Reference: Still Moot after 20 Years," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 13 (May 1987): 73-74.

‘correctness’ of any particular piece of information the librarian has retrieved.”<sup>11</sup>

Even when users’ emotional response and needs are considered in the evaluation of reference interactions, these are often secondary to factual correctness.<sup>12</sup> Such a narrow approach denies the context within which the user asks the question and their method of constructing knowledge as key aspects of client satisfaction.

An additional barrier to understanding clients within the Technical Rationality view of the profession is the uneven power dynamic set in place between a practitioner and a layperson. Stover explains the potential pitfall of an uneven power dynamic in this way:

In most professional work, especially those where the clients are unsophisticated and relatively powerless, the professional acts as a monopolistic gatekeeper to both resources and knowledge to create an impenetrable façade that few if any clients can overcome.<sup>13</sup>

While this description may be more accurate in the hard professions such as medicine or law, a similar situation certainly occurs within the information profession. In the case of librarianship, the very status of whether the field is a profession or not may lead some librarians to reinforce such “impenetrable façades” in order to establish their role as experts.<sup>14</sup>

Though the main purpose of librarianship is to connect users with information, the very systems set up to do so are often labyrinthine and opaque. It

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<sup>11</sup> M. L. Radford, “Communication Theory Applied to the Reference Encounter: An Analysis of critical incidents,” *Library Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (April 1996): 124.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Stover, “The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise,” 277.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

only takes a quick survey of information studies literature to stumble across a mound of jargon which is likely to impede the process of laypersons—controlled vocabulary, access points, MARC, authority control, and the list could continue almost endlessly. If anyone doubts the profusion of jargon, one need only look to a popular satirical journal for a list of information science terms that could be interpreted as sexual innuendo.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the opacity in terms describing information systems, the very means of access can be equally riddled with difficulty for laypersons. The use of authority control and controlled vocabularies are not always self-evidentially helpful to clients. A perfect example of this might be the Library of Congress Subject Heading structures in which a specific ordering of concepts within a subject heading is proscribed. There is little reason to believe users can readily understand the purposes and structures of such vocabularies without instruction.<sup>16</sup>

## *1.2 Models of the client*

The model for information seeking is often perceived as a question-answer paradigm, where the knowledge sought is discovered rather than created.<sup>17</sup> The role of the reference librarian within this paradigm is to simply aid the patron in fixing their information problem. One of the most widely cited theories of information-

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<sup>15</sup> Aaron J. Enright, "Library Science Jargon That Sounds Dirty," *McSweeney's [Online]*, n.d., <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/links/lists/library.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Drabenstott, Schelle Simcox, and Eileen Fenton, "End-user Understanding of Subject Headings in Library Catalogs," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 43, no. 3 (July 1999): 140-160.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Olsson, "Beyond 'needy' individuals: Conceptualizing information behavior," *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 42, no. 1 (2005): n/a, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/meet.1450420161>.

seeking behavior is that of Belkin's Anomalous States of Knowledge (ASK) in which behaviors are motivated from a recognition that one's knowledge structures are no longer sufficient to resolve a problem.<sup>18</sup> Information need, however, is not necessarily the motivation for information seeking, and viewing it as such in the literature constrains the ways in which we can understand library clients desires and motivations.<sup>19</sup>

This rational problem-solving model of information seeking has caused two major limitations in the way clients' information desires are interpreted by librarians: a focus on client ignorance and a focus on purposive information seeking.<sup>20</sup> The focus on client ignorance allows the librarian to view the reference interview as though she were a doctor examining a patient with an ailment. Too often this construct of the librarian-client relationship leads to an over simplification of the actual information need. Stover uses the example of a library client asking a routine question, such as "Where are your journals?" to illustrate how this question-answer paradigm limits the aid reference librarians offer. The typical response to such an inquiry is to point to the location on a map and send the

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholas J Belkin, "The cognitive viewpoint in information science," *Journal of Information Science* 16, no. 1 (1990): 11-15, <http://jis.sagepub.com/content/16/1/11.abstract>.

<sup>19</sup> Heidi Julien, "Where to from here? Results of an empirical study and user-centered implications for system design," in *Exploring the contexts of information behaviour* (Taylor Graham Publishing, 1999), 586-596.; Bernd Frohmann, "The Power of Images: A Discourse Analysis of Cognitive Viewpoint," *Journal of Documentation* 48, no. 4 (1992): 365-386.; Sanna Talja, "Constituting "information" and "user" as research objects: a theory of knowledge formations as an alternative to the information man-theory," in *Proceedings of an international conference on Information seeking in context* (Tampere, Finland: Taylor Graham Publishing, 1997), 67-80.

<sup>20</sup> Olsson, "Beyond 'needy' individuals: Conceptualizing information behavior", 6-8.

client on their way rather than to inquire why the client would like access to journals and to suggest subject appropriate sources or research methodologies.<sup>21</sup>

It is not difficult to understand why librarians might wish to view the information world in such a rational question-answer paradigm. Its underlying principles are intellectual freedom and cataloging, which posits neutrality and rationality as foundations for both endeavors. However, as we will see this closed-view of information-seeking and behaviors diminishes the range of possible outcomes of the reference interview, particularly with users who do not neatly fit into the structure of the library's information universe.

## **2. These models create barriers to artists**

### *2.1 Cataloging codes derived from different discipline*

To understand just how devastating these pervasive models of librarianship can be, we will now focus on the effect this view of professionalism has had on the under-served visual arts community. Because these practices often make reliance on a reference librarian necessary, we will first examine the systemic barriers that make users seek a librarian in the first place. Primarily, this section will focus on cataloging practices as an example of how artists' interests have largely been overlooked within the information profession. Though general browsing still occurs to some degree, many if not most access begins with the meditation of the online catalog. If the catalog does not reflect the vocabulary and concerns of its users, access will be limited. Of particular concern in the case of artists is subject

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<sup>21</sup> Stover, "The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise."



cataloging and classification. Because of the relationship between studio art and art history, the informational need of artists in art books has been systematically ignored within subject headings due largely to the practice of literary warrant.

A 1988 article on the information synthesis of art historians makes clear the bias as to who gets to determine meaning in the arts literatures: “Art objects– once so defined– have only the connections given to them *by a critic or art historian* with a vision, whether that vision be historical, iconographic, stylistic, phenomenological, aesthetic, or some combination thereof” (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup> The power to determine meaning, here, is given solely to outside consumers of the artistic process rather than to artists themselves. While the art historian may record a connection between the handprint in a Jasper Johns painting and the handprint in a Jackson Pollock, Johns was the one who left the mark.<sup>23</sup> Certainly these parallels do not always occur by direct intention on the artist’s part, but the nonverbal connection should not be discredited from its role in a larger visual language and footnoting that occurs in the visual arts.

In the same way it is sometimes presumed art historians form the body of an arts literature within which the artists concerns lie, subject cataloging presumes the written record of art historians suffices for subject heading determination.

However, the practice and needs of studio artists, while sometimes shared with the

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Brilliant, “How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information,” *Library Trends* 37, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 120-29, [http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/7590/librarytrendsv37i2c\\_opt.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/7590/librarytrendsv37i2c_opt.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>23</sup> Jackson Pollock, a painter who famously employed a method of dripping paint onto a canvas without touching it, would sometimes leave handprints within the drips of paint. Because his method did not involve his touching the canvas generally, the handprints took on a greater significance. Jasper Johns, a painter who came after Pollock, often left handprints on his own canvases making a visual link between his work and Pollock’s.

art historian or critique, are not completely the same. Though art historians' work revolves around their ability to remember, interpret and compare visual images, these experiences and insights are converted to scholarly articles whose focus may be more narrowly defined and codified than the insights and experiences of artists.

## *2.2 Affective needs misunderstood*

Artists are not alone in facing systemic barriers to access due to cataloging traditions. Such patrons are likely to need the help of a reference librarian much more than other users. However, a brief look at the literature on artists' information-seeking practices illustrates the hostility and skepticism artists may frequently face when seeking help from a reference librarian. Nearly all of the early studies on the topic use librarians rather than artists as the main data source.<sup>24</sup> It is unsurprising then, that the findings focus on artists as flawed library users. Many of the studies investigating artists' use and interest in libraries posit the difficulties encountered in the library on the artists themselves rather than a flaw in the system.<sup>25</sup> Stam goes as far as to report:

...artists have little patience for reference tools. They do not know how to use indexes and they have little interest in learning; they don't have the time, they don't come with the skills, and some artists can't even read well.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Derek Toyne, "Requests at Falmouth School of Art," *ARLIS Newsletter* 24 (1975): 7-9.

Philip Pacey, "How art students use libraries—if they do.," *Art Libraries Journal* 7 (1982): 33-38.

<sup>25</sup> Toyne, "Requests at Falmouth School of Art.,"; Dierde Stam, "Artists and Art Libraries: The Text of a paper presented to the IFLA Section of Art Libraries at the IFLA Conference at Havana, August 1994," *Art Libraries Journal* 20, no. 2 (1995): 21-24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The frustration with which librarians respond to surveys on the topic seem to confirm a need to change our approach to working with artists at the reference desk (and other areas of the institution). Noting the importance of library-user relationships Francis states of users, “all they know is how they are treated by the librarian.”<sup>27</sup> If so, librarians may need to reassess their understanding of how and why artists seek information.

One area in which librarians seem to fail is their tendency to see artists through the lens of an entrenched social stereotype of the artist. In many studies, the stereotype of the artist as driven by his “manias, quirks, insecurities and beliefs” in its various forms is perpetuated.<sup>28</sup> Cobbledick, one of the first researchers to make speaking directly to artists a priority, marvels at the information community’s dismissal of the potential for artists to use the library based off the unfounded model of artist as a “brooding intense figure literally immersed in his own paintings.”<sup>29</sup> While not all researchers investigating artists’ information needs take such an alienating stance, its prevalence in the literature is an alarming sign of hostile undercurrents in libraries and their understanding of the creative process and alternate ways of information seeking.

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Francis, “Interview to interaction: towards a terminology of equality in reference work,” *Library Student Journal* (2006), <http://www.librarystudentjournal.org/index.php/ljsj/article/viewArticle/23/13>.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Toyne, “An Art School Librarian’s Philosophy,” in *A Reader in Art Librarianship*, ed. Philip Pacey (New York: Saur, 1985), 56-62.

Stam, “Artists and Art Libraries: The Text of a paper presented to the IFLA Section of Art Libraries at the IFLA Conference at Havana, August 1994.”, 21.

Susie Cobbledick, “The information-seeking behavior of artists: exploratory interviews,” *The Library Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1996): 343-372.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3 Understanding information behaviors of artists

Encouragingly, the most recent studies trend toward giving agency to artists to speak about their informational motivations and practices for themselves.<sup>30</sup> Two frequently cited studies focus on the informational need<sup>31</sup> and the informational practice<sup>32</sup> of artists. Though these studies use the more traditional models of relating information need to cognitive gaps or problem solving, more holistic investigations of artists as forming knowledge within a social framework are not available. For the time being, any changes made to services to artists will have to progress from the studies available. However, the author does encourage the information community to engage in more extensive research of artists' information-seeking behaviors.

Through the use of exploratory interviews with a small set of artists from an academic community, Cobbledick draws out the general needs across artists as a community: inspiration, specific visual elements, technical information, current trends, and avenues for exhibition or sale.<sup>33</sup> Frank shows us the various iterations of browsing and discovery involved in the art student's pursuit of visual information.

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<sup>30</sup> William Hemmig, "An empiracle study of the information-seeking behavior of practicing visual artists," *Journal of Documentation* 65, no. 4 (2009): 682-703, <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0022-0418.htm>.; William Hemmig, "The information-seeking behavior of visual artists: a literature review," *Journal of Documentation* 64, no. 3 (2008): 343-362, [www.emeraldinsight.com/0022-0418.htm](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0022-0418.htm).; Sandra Cowan, "Information Visual Poetry: Information Needs and Sources of Artists," *Art Documentation* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 14-20, <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/jumpstart.jhtml?recid=0bc05f7a67b1790e9f96e7614f7b99555340e0d1e0499bf91089ffb988c89f8fe0fa7e382e790f41&fmt=P> Cowan, S. Informing Visual Poetry: Information Needs and Sources of Artists. *Art Documentation* v. 23 no. 2 (Fall 2004) p. 14-20.; Cobbledick, "The information-seeking behavior of artists: exploratory interviews."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Polly Frank, "Student artists in the library: an investigation of how they use general academic libraries for their creative needs," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 6 (November 1999): 445-455, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6W50-3YTBW12-4/2/48c3fa3371b9149831388ec598b78f37>.

<sup>33</sup> Cobbledick, "The information-seeking behavior of artists: exploratory interviews."

Many students expressed that browsing, namely in terms of *looking*, informed their studio practice and the development of a sense of visual language.<sup>34</sup> It is unsurprising then that existing library structures based on linguistic identifiers does not meet their needs adequately.

The most recently published study on artists and information practices makes an effort to explore the relationship between need and the selection of an information practice to meet that need.<sup>35</sup> Hemmig refines Cobbedick's list of needs and provides lists of possible sources artists might use to satisfy these needs. Sources ranked with above average significance for meeting the *Inspirational need* were in order of perceived importance: natural forms, personal experience, art and architecture seen in person, man-made non-art objects, images in art magazines, and images in art books.<sup>36</sup> Though the top four needs are met most immediately outside the confines of the library, supporting material as visual reference to natural forms, artworks seen in person, and man-made objects might be found in the images in books or online collections held by libraries. A similar trend could be identified in the sources contributing to *Visual Element need*. The other two categories of need explored by Hemmig, *Material/Technical need* and *Career Information need* found their sources embedded within the community of artists and their art practice.<sup>37</sup> This study involving a community not directly associated with a library or academic department suggests that artists *do* look to libraries to meet some of their

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<sup>34</sup> Frank, "Student artists in the library: an investigation of how they use general academic libraries for their creative needs.", 450-451

<sup>35</sup> Hemmig, "An empiracle study of the information-seeking behavior of practicing visual artists."

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 688

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 690-692.

informational needs and might perhaps benefit from deeper consideration of their interests within the library.

The question then arises, *how can the library accommodate artists' way of understanding and information-gathering?* Clearly, there are many factors that motivate artists to seek out information, many of which may not align with the traditional notion of a specifiable "information need." The information profession may need to consider that the artist's information-gathering process could possibly be an end in itself—a type of process that allows them to work out the visual or suggestive mechanics of an artwork before they even begin making it.

It is not enough to simply state that artists do not fit the traditional research model. We must discover a new way to discuss these non-traditional library clients. One approach may be to conceive of artists as forming a 'community of practice.' Thinking of artists in such a way allows the librarian a framework from which to consider the best methods of service because it validates the information behaviors and interests shared among many artists. This would elevate the information practices of artists to the same seriousness with which librarians view the inquiries of art historians.

Wegner describes a community of practice as resulting from three elements:<sup>38</sup>

Domain: a shared commitment to a particular interest and competence

within the group, which may or may not be visible from outside the domain.

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<sup>38</sup> Etienne Wenger, "Communities of practice: A brief introduction" (Office of the Vice Provost of Information Technology, University of Alberta, n.d.), [www.vpit.ualberta.ca/cop/](http://www.vpit.ualberta.ca/cop/).

Community: a set of shared activities, conversations and relationships,  
which may or may not be contingent on frequent face-to-face contact.

Practice: a shared toolkit consisting of narratives, experiences, and ways of  
examining an issue.

Conceiving of artists' shared pursuits in this context will inevitably lead to subjective judgments and potential misunderstandings. However, it serves as a platform from which to consider how to assist an artist as a reference librarian. For example, an artist may be more interested in the associations between ideas or objects given that the artistic practice is one that relies on visual associations, so in some cases the librarian should perhaps approach the research topic in the same manner, offering suggestions for resources within the library collection based of her own creative associations. Giving a new way to conceptualize the practice of art and artists' place within it, will certainly aid librarians in offering better services in the future.

### **3. Interpersonal model of reference work**

#### *3.1 The non-expert model*

In a session during the 1988 ARLIS/NA conference, then assistant dean of the UCLA Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Dorothy Anderson compared the reference interview to a dance. Both situations require a leader and follower, and both are creative and cooperative endeavors that can tease out both participants' insecurities and suspicions. She made a plea for librarians to allow themselves to drop façades of stoic professionalism in order to better understand

the user's perspectives and needs.<sup>39</sup> If this metaphor holds, then it seems artists and librarians may have been stepping on each other's toes in the past.

Beginning to think of reference librarianship as a joint endeavor between client and librarian, however, is a good start to alleviating many of the flaws of past efforts. Mark Stover provides the profession of a cooperative model; he draws from post-modern conceptions of expertise, namely psychotherapy, to outline a new model of interaction with library clients, *librarian as non-expert*.<sup>40</sup> As he states it, "The stance of the librarian as non-expert moves the profession of librarianship away from the technocrat/expert model and back towards its earlier mission of service and human-centered values."<sup>41</sup>

The definition of *librarian as non-expert* is based in postmodern theories of the creation of meaning as part of a communicative and relational process. To understand this notion, librarians can look to the model of psychotherapy. Rather than trying to "fix" a patient by replacing their narratives with those of the "expert" therapist, the therapist and patient work together to create a new narrative that establishes a healthier reality for patient.<sup>42</sup> Schön perhaps gives the best explanation of what the non-expert professional-client relationship looks like:

Although the reflective practitioner should be credentialed and technically competent, his claim to authority is substantially based on his ability to manifest his special knowledge in interactions with his

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Prescott, "The Reference Interview: Performance Art or Measurement of Performance," *Art Documentation* 8 (Fall 1989): 128.

<sup>40</sup> Stover, "The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.



clients. He does not ask the client to have blind faith in a “black box,” but to remain open to the evidence of the practitioner’s competence as it emerges....Thus, in a reflective contract between practitioner and client, the client does not agree to accept the practitioner’s authority but to suspend disbelief in it.<sup>43</sup>

In this model, the reference librarian finds the validation of her profession not in expert knowledge she has gained through training but rather in her ability to reconstruct that knowledge in cooperation with clients. This type of reference interview parses “expert knowledge (which both librarian and client have) and expert posture (which involves attitudes, behaviors, and actions).”<sup>44</sup> Removing the expert posture from the reference interview empowers the client to see himself as equal with the librarian and capable of obtaining her special knowledge.

### *3.2 Acknowledging the social aspect of information behavior*

To supplement the non-expert model of librarianship, we must re-examine how we understand clients’ motivations for seeking information through the lens of social context. An array of studies position individual’s information behaviors and knowledge construction within the context of social interaction.<sup>45</sup> On such views

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<sup>43</sup> Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, 296-297.

<sup>44</sup> Stover, “The Reference Librarian as Non-Expert: A Postmodern Approach to Expertise,” 288.

<sup>45</sup> Kimmo Tuominen, “User-Centered Discourse: An Analysis of the Subject Positions of the User and the Librarian,” *The Library Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (October 1, 1997): 350-371, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40039589>; Alison Bain, “Constructing an artistic identity,” *Work, Employment & Society* 19, no. 1 (2005): 25-46, <http://wes.sagepub.com/content/19/1/25.abstract>; Jennie Billot, “The imagined and the real: identifying the tensions for academic identity,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 29, no. 6 (December 2010): 709-721, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=55053724&site=ehost-live>.

(sociotechnical perspectives, constructionism, discourse analysis), knowledge creation does not occur within a closed environment of the individual but as a shared understanding and exchange of meaning in communities. Much of this knowledge creation consists of understanding one's position in relationship to other theories and community members.

An example of how these theories conceive of knowledge creation is Olsson's study examining how graduate formulate ideas about an author's work.<sup>46</sup> Olsson found that the graduates pursuits could be characterized as:

Not simply ask[ing] 'What does this mean?' or even 'What does this mean for me?' Rather, they asked 'What does this mean for me in terms of my understanding of and engagement with my field? My specialization/s and particular research interests? My philosophical and conceptual frameworks? My current projects, current teaching?'<sup>47</sup>

If we begin to see each client's knowledge creation processes as fluid, socially bound processes, then we will be better able to probe more deeply into their research questions and potentially offer them better, more perceptive service.

#### **4. Theory into practice, a non-expert's professional opinion**

The very essence of a profession is translating theory into practice, so any theoretical discussion of reference service should make an attempt to grasp the concrete implications of a theory in everyday practice. The theories suggest that the

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<sup>46</sup> Olsson, "Beyond 'needy' individuals: Conceptualizing information behavior."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 9.

goal of reference should be a constructive dialog between client and librarian rather than a specific factual answer. The mutual respect required for the model of librarian as non-expert springs out of the interpersonal relationships built between librarian and client.

Whether reference librarians work in a public library, museum, or academic library, understanding the social norms and context of the artists' environment is paramount to providing adequate service. Schon provides a description of the social nature of the studio practice of artists

under the guidance of a studio master who functions less as a teacher than as a coach who demonstrates, advises, questions, and criticizes.

They work with other students, who sometimes play the coach's role.

As they immerse themselves in the shared world of the practicum,

they unconsciously acquire a kind of background learning of which

they will become aware as they move to other settings later on.<sup>48</sup>

Though Schon describes the studio in the academic context, the description of a shared construction of learning with a decentralized power structure is relevant to any artists' studio practice. Understanding that artists use social settings to test and refine ideas suggests reference librarians should alter their assumptions about the artists' informational need into an openness to become part of the artist's studio practice. Such awareness means reference librarians should allow themselves to be challenged by artists and not view this as a personal attack on their expertise.

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<sup>48</sup> Donald Schon, "Toward a Marriage of Artistry & Applied Science in the Architectural Design Studio," *Journal of Architectural Education* 41, no. 4 (Summer 1988): 5.

Likewise, greater patience may be required when consulting with artists in order to allow them to work out their ideas with the librarian.

Understanding the social construction of artists' knowledge should lead librarians to reassess the meaning of a successful reference interview. Rather than providing an answer to a specifically articulated question, the reference interview for the artist may simply be folded into a larger fluid and ambient pursuit of information. Any linearly logical progression within the reference interview may not be achievable, and should not be a measurement of success for interactions with artists. Rather, success should be couched in terms of the affective outcome of the interview. Though there are no studies directly assessing the importance of affective factors in the artists' view of reference interviews, general studies of affective factors and library clients' assessment of the success of a reference interaction are deeply intertwined.<sup>49</sup> Given that question-answering may be difficult to assess in reference interactions with artists, affective factors may have an even stronger sway over the perceived success of interviews.

The case of artists in the library may be an opportunity to assess whether core library values are always the most advisable means of aiding our clients. The two core values in question are privacy and neutrality.<sup>50</sup> The artist may see the librarian as one more individual in a spectrum from which they construct their

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<sup>49</sup> Radford, "Communication Theory Applied to the Reference Encounter: An Analysis of critical incidents."

<sup>50</sup> American Library Association, "Core Values of Librarianship," *American Library Association Website*, June 29, 2004, <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/corevaluesstatement/corevalues.cfm#democracy>; Reference and User Services Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," *Reference and User Services Association Website*, June 2004, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral.cfm>.

understanding of their work; therefore, the librarian's interest and opinion may be crucial for the artist's construction of a frame of reference within which to work.<sup>51</sup> Privacy policies such as refraining from asking why an individual wants a certain type of information may also be of less importance if the questioning drills down to discover an unexpressed informational need or motivation. However, this should be tempered with the understanding that asking such questions may be seen as a subtle type of censorship in some cases.

## **5. Conclusion**

Only over time in relationships do people gain the ability to accurately read each other within a context of understanding. The reference setting is no exception. However, allowing ourselves as reference librarians to elevate the position of the library client to an equal within the reference interview will empower them to more accurately and confidentially express their motivations and desires. Minding the complex emotional factors within the reference exchange can alter the experience for the user, making the experience positive even if no "questions" are "answered." Rather mutual respect begins to establish a relationship of trust, and for artists this may be critical in opening the library resources to their unique information requirements. If the librarian approaches them without stereotyping and validates even their strange requests, she may soon find herself playing an important role in the artists' studio practice.

Some libraries take this approach to the extreme. The Russian State Art Library is just such an example. Reference librarians take on the role of advisor to

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<sup>51</sup> Bain, "Constructing an artistic identity."

choreographers, set designers, and creative directors; the librarians use their knowledge of the collection's historical images, texts, and fashion plates to help artists develop accurate reproductions or interpretations of a certain time period. This interaction has resulted in a mutual exchange between the library and the artists' community. Artists' work developed in the library is frequently exhibited there, and artists often donate works to the library's collection.<sup>52</sup> Though not all libraries have the resources or manpower to establish such interactive roles in the arts community, the Russian State Art Library shows us the value of establishing trust and respect within the reference environment, both for the library's interests and the artists'.

Changing our social and affective behaviors is much more difficult than simply implementing a checklist and sticking to it. It requires reassessing our ideas about the role of the reference librarian, our stereotypes about underserved communities, and our assumptions about what reference work *should be*. However, beginning to change the theoretical framework of librarianship is one toward changing our own emotional response to the work. Patience and honesty with ourselves and our clients will pave the way to more effective service, even when we make mistakes. Much like the psychotherapist, the librarian's job is less about providing answers than providing a new social narrative in which to thrive.

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<sup>52</sup> Ida Kolganova, "Creative Co-operation between Librarian and Artists in the Russian State Arts Library," *Art Libraries Journal* 20, no. 2 (1995): 25-27.