Management 2.0

Avoiding the Reference Desk: Stereotype Threat

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Keisha entered the library and sat down at a carrel near the reference desk. She had a major paper due and knew she needed some help from a librarian, but first she had to work up the nerve to approach the desk. The last time she did this, it wasn't quite the experience she had hoped for - the librarian wasn't familiar with her topic and struggled along with Keisha as they retrieved a few articles they hoped would meet her needs. Keisha left the library feeling dissatisfied and had avoided it for all of her other work up until now. She looked up at the workers; some of them looked kind of young – were they real librarians? Student workers? And, as usual, they were all Caucasian, so that Keisha questioned whether she should bring her topic on black Americans to one of them. Would they understand what she was doing and would they really be able to help her? Would they think her questions were elementary and not worthy of a graduate student? She sighed and gathered her things for the long trek to the reference desk.

This time around, I address the issue of stereotype threat and why, despite your best efforts, minority students may avoid using your reference services. I primarily address managers in academic libraries; however, public librarians may also find this information useful.

Stereotype threat. We often see ourselves the way others see us. If people tell us we are smart and pretty or slow and plain, we may see ourselves that way well into adulthood. The television talk shows are full of sad people living sad lives because they saw themselves in the unflattering (and often false) ways that others saw them. Perhaps the most obvious way that people see themselves through the eyes of others is in terms of race. Steele[1] suggests that *stereotype threat* is "the threat of being viewed through lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype"[2]. Many college students, regardless of race, feel embarrassed if they have to admit they don't know something that they think others know. For students of color, there may also be risk and stress involved in asking for help. They wonder if others will think that their questions stem from incompetence and ignorance. They fear that they will confirm stereotypes of blacks as less intelligent, less able, and less worthy of being in college. They fear that simply by asking questions, others will think that they got into college because of affirmative action rather than merit and that they are not equal to white students.

Stereotype threat is a powerful force that constrains people's actions and interactions. While I focus here on black students, stereotype threat has been found in other populations. For example, Latinas[3] and women[4] can be affected by it[5] as well as white males taking math vis-à-vis Asian students.[6]

Stereotype threat can be a constant companion for minority students in majority institutions. It is a source of stress which affects how they deal with faculty, staff, students, and librarians. Put yourself in their place. You may be the only person of color in the department. you can't share your research interests because no one else knows or cares about what you do, perhaps you've already gotten the feeling from your advisor that your focus on minority research interests indicates that you are not a serious researcher. Worse, you may think that your advisor ignores or disrespects you simply because of your race. There is little reason to share insecurities about your work when you think that simply by asking a question, you may negatively affect your progress in the program. Students may be concerned that whatever information they retrieve, it will not be good enough for non-minority audiences, such as fellow students and their professors. And while it is not unusual for students to be concerned about how others will judge the completeness of their work, for black students, presenting retrieved information can invite the negative reactions that feed into stereotype threat. These students never simply ask themselves, 'Did I do the assignment correctly?' but 'Did I do it correctly or will my work justify their belief that blacks aren't good students?'

Stereotype threat may be an element of information anxiety. In 1986 Constance Mellon suggested the term 'library anxiety'[7] to explain undergraduate student anxieties about using the library.[8] Students may be afraid to interrupt a librarian who appears busy, even when there are no patrons the reference desk. They may believe that other students knew more about both the library building and its resources. This belief that others know more contributes to the students' anxiety as they approach the reference desk. Are they the only student with this question? Will the librarian think they are stupid? Should they have figured out the answer on their own (after all, they did attend the library orientation)?

These feelings are not unique to undergraduates; feelings of intimidation and anxiety can also bedevil even the best graduate student, who then procrastinate[9] on assignments because visiting the library causes too much stress.[10] Because anxiety is so uncomfortable, people try to avoid it. Therefore, they avoid the uncomfortable feelings that come with asking for assistance by avoiding interacting with the librarian. Jiao and Onwuegbuzie[11] suggested that avoiding the library and librarians may be a primary reason why many graduate students fail to complete the thesis or dissertation, and therefore fail to finish the degree, because they are uncomfortable with a process that usually requires extensive use of library resources and a high level of library expertise.

Library anxiety is a useful foundational concept; however, students use information sources besides the library. I suggest that difficulties in using these various resources indicate *information anxiety* rather than library anxiety. To satisfy their information needs, students talk to professors and teaching assistants, office administrators and fellow students. They use the internet, from databases provided by their school library to authoritative sites from researchers, think tanks, the government, and professional organizations. In fact, students will go anywhere to satisfy these needs, but in the presence of stereotype threat, however, 'anywhere' rarely includes the library.

No one wants to be judged every time they ask a question. Rather than risk being judged by the librarian, black students may avoid the librarian and turn to other black students for help, even if those students were outside of their discipline. Stereotype threat can lay a heavy burden on black students to avoid being judged, so that they attempt to find all of the information they need on their own, to an extent not expected of Caucasian students.[12]

Address stereotype threat by improving outreach. At many colleges and universities, the 'typical' student isn't so typical anymore. There are increasing numbers of blacks, first generation, Hispanic, immigrant, disabled, LGBT, and nontraditional students. People approaching the reference desk may be carrying a lot of baggage from past experiences with librarians. Some bear a great deal of anxiety and stress just by their current status as a minority in a majority environment. While many higher education institutions tout student enrollments and how 'diverse' they are, diversity is more than numbers. It includes respect for each person as you meet them. People get a good idea about what you think of them by how you treat them. Is your staff friendly and accommodating? Are they just going through the motions – which may be interpreted as disinterest at best, and outright hostility at worst?

Could your subject specialists have more interaction with departments? Do students at all levels, not just graduate students, know your staff's areas of expertise? Do they even know that you have subject specialists? Perhaps you announce when the library gets a new resource – do you hold a workshop to show students how to use it? And yes, you might have to bow to the reality of Google Scholar – do you show students how to use it to their best advantage? I know it can be difficult to get people to show up for some library activities. Often, this is because the presumed audience has not realized it has a need for what you want to teach. You have to reach them at the right time or with the right inducements. When I was a doctoral student, a 'Learn Journal Databases' workshop would not have grabbed my attention, but a workshop on 'Research Tips for Dissertation Writers' would have. If your collections don't reflect minority research topics, it might be useful for librarians to work with minority student groups to develop collections that include the research interests that are attractive to these students.

Managers can help library staff understand that many students (not only minorities) come to the reference desk with more than questions. They come with ideas about themselves, feelings about what other people think of them, fears that they are different and are being judged on that difference and falling short in the comparison. But as different as these students may feel, in many respects they are similar to any other student who comes to the reference desk. They are trying to satisfy information needs just like everyone else. They need to know what resources are available and how to use them, just like everyone else. They have the same right to be respected as individuals and to have their research respected as contributing to the academic community – just like everyone else.

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