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Affirming the research party reference model

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Affirming the research party reference model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence of the value of Research Parties, a new model of supplementary reference in a social environment.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey of multiple choice and open-ended questions was administered to Research Party participants ($n = 43$) over the course of three semesters to discover the profiles of the undergraduate students who attended and how they heard about the event and to assess the value of the interaction to the student.

Findings – Respondents unanimously agreed that their interactions with librarians at Research Parties were helpful because their information seeking needs, including finding sources, learning how to search databases, gaining clarity into the assignment, writing and citing, were met. Respondents also mentioned attributes of the librarian's disposition or attitude such as enthusiastic conversation, encouragement and patience. Several students reflected on their own learning process and noted that they would seek help from a librarian again.

Practical implications – The results demonstrate that Research Parties are helpful to undergraduate students and a worthwhile model for academic libraries looking to complement their traditional reference services.

Originality/value – While faculty and administrators have verbally expressed excitement about Research Parties, librarian colleagues have anecdotally reported success instituting this model at their institutions, and students have provided informal positive feedback, this is the first time the model has been evaluated more formally to capture its value.

Keywords Research, Students, Academic libraries, Undergraduates, Case study, Reference services

Paper type Case study

Introduction

There is no doubt that undergraduate students need assistance using the library – from selecting sources to evaluating sources to using and producing information ethically – yet one of the primary modes of aiding students, the reference desk, is seeing declining interactions. Such has been the case at Penn State Abington, a campus of about 4,000 undergraduate students in the Philadelphia suburbs. Reference interactions had declined, the reference desk was sparsely staffed and students were not using the reference desk, scheduling research consultations or stopping by the librarians' offices.

During the Spring 2016 semester, in an effort to make our reference services and the ways that librarians can assist students more visible, we experimented with an event model of reference, called Research Parties, which are 2-h drop-in spaces where students can get help from a librarian (Hunter and Riehman-Murphy, 2017). Marketing it widely around campus and directly to teaching faculty, we hoped that by calling the event a party it would be perceived by students as a non-intimidating environment in which to seek assistance



from a librarian. In our small library classroom, we formed clusters of desks to foster a social environment and allow for collaboration among both students and librarians. We also provided refreshments, and, as the result of early student feedback, Chromebooks for students who did not have their own devices. Ten students attended the first Research Party in April 2016 and when we evaluated the event, concluded that assisting ten students with research needs over the course of 2 h was indeed a success.

We have continued hosting two to three Research Parties each semester for a total of 13 parties to date, serving 177 undergraduate students over 26 h with considerable positive feedback from students, faculty and administration. These parties comprised 36 per cent of the total reference interactions ($n = 493$), which include all questions asked at the reference desk ($n = 206$, 42 per cent) and during office consultations ($n = 110$, 22 per cent) that occurred during that same time period. Given the considerable time commitment of both staffing the reference desk and making oneself available for consultations, Research Parties provide a clear high-impact ratio of time to interaction. Anecdotal evidence and conversations among the librarians who staffed the parties demonstrated that the interactions occurring at Research Parties were positive and seemed to be valuable and helpful for students, at least from the librarians' perspectives. Likewise, several other institutions have thrown Research Parties and we have heard anecdotally from librarians that they have been successful. One institution has thrown Research Parties and deemed them a successful event based on the increase in participants after rebranding an existing event (Wengler, 2018). Motivated by this perceived success, we wanted to better understand the students who were likely to attend, which marketing tactics were successful and what value, if any, the students perceived from the interactions. This paper provides the results of this initial inquiry and offers suggestions about how Research Parties might be extended to other institutional contexts.

Literature review

Reference is at the core of librarians' work (Murray, 2016; O'Gorman and Trott, 2009), yet much of the literature on face-to-face reference services in academic libraries describes moving away from a traditional sit-and-wait model. Demands on librarians' time, declining questions and questions that do not need to be answered by a professional librarian are often cited as reasons why librarians are seeking out other models (Arndt, 2010; Bugg and Odom, 2009; Bunnett *et al.*, 2016; Chavez, 2016; McClure and Bravender, 2013; Peters, 2015). Yet, there is still a need for mediated reference services and value in individual attention from a librarian, librarian's expertise and librarian/student engagement (Bandyopadhyay and Boyd-Byrnes, 2016; Rogers and Carrier, 2016). Gratz and Gilbert (2011, p. 431) in a study of students at their institution found that students "view the reference desk as a necessary service". Students need assistance finding and selecting sources, evaluating sources for reliability, providing information about the library, and reducing their stress (Magi and Mardeusz, 2013). As Vinyard *et al.* (2017, p. 265) wrote, "librarians, even in this DIY culture, are relevant, and appreciated for their expertise and abilities in helping students overcome their research challenges".

Much of the literature surrounding supplemental references services reveals that librarians also are trying to find ways to demonstrate how to work with a librarian and how to engage students in accessible ways. Despite the reported need for mediated library services, one library discovered that students were confused about what a librarian does at the reference desk, which made it difficult for students to know how to seek research assistance (Arndt, 2010), and another discovered that 21 per cent of those surveyed did not know that the library offered reference services (Carey and Pathak, 2017). This confusion

about how to find academic assistance extends beyond the library. For example, two professors found that students, especially those who needed the most help, were reluctant to visit them during office hours. In turn, they developed a Course Center, a space where professors are waiting and students can ask questions or simply work alongside others with their professors close by. Like many innovative models of reference, this program was supplemental to, not a replacement for, office hours (Chung and Hsu, 2006). Another investigation found that students did not know how to get academic assistance and therefore brought the learning center into the library space and advertised workshops that helped students to understand the nature of “academic help seeking” (Pillai, 2010, p. 22).

Student engagement is a useful lens through which to examine reference services that are supplementing traditional reference services. Schlak (2018) performed a literature review of the landscape of student engagement in higher education and then contextualized the definitions in terms of the emerging library literature around engagement. His work revealed four facets of how academic libraries are articulating their efforts:

- (1) engaging students with information literacy and their own learning;
- (2) empowering librarians as educators and “knowledge players”;
- (3) providing space and services for student engagement; and
- (4) moving from transactional interactions to partnerships and relationship building (p. 137).

Many of the emerging models of reference described in the literature to supplement traditional reference services fall into one or more of these categories of student engagement.

Modeling information seeking behavior is one way of empowering librarians as educators and also engaging students more deeply with their own learning. Simmons (2005, p. 308) argued that librarians are expertly positioned to play a powerful role in helping students understand the disciplinary conventions of their fields and of higher education in general and must do so “explicitly through explanation and implicitly through modeling”. More recently, in a series on social psychology and libraries in *The Reference Librarian*, Black and Allen (2018) explore the ways that libraries become social learning spaces for students through observational learning. They note that watching other students engage with the library and librarians is important for other students as “students observe the models set by classmates’ behavior” (p. 78). In addition, when working with a librarian in a social setting, students also have an opportunity to see other students overcome difficulties, making the idea of their own success more attainable (Black and Allen, 2018, p. 79). Some libraries are increasing modeling behavior by providing multiple computers so students can work independently or side-by-side with a librarian (Deineh *et al.*, 2011) or by creating concept spaces that “recontextualize reference services [...] into a collaborative, experimental environment designed to inspire, encourage user ownership of the space, and demonstrate the value of reference” (Dickerson, 2016). According to Magi and Mardeusz (2013), students also describe value in watching a librarian model the process of research so they can replicate it at home, talking over ideas with someone, and having a librarian explain the assignment and discuss credibility of sources. On a similar note, Chavez (2016, p. 221) recounts how their library developed a model that created a “relaxed, nonthreatening space” where “librarians make their thoughts, questions, and personal learning transparent not only to each other, but also to students”.

Key to the success of any reference service though is strategic advertising about that service. The literature concludes that informing constituents about reference services contributes to upticks in usage (Miles, 2013). Carey and Pathak (2017) emphasized the need

for outreach about reference services because 21 per cent did not realize that the library offered reference services. Rogers and Carrier (2016) found that people were surprised that in-office consultations were a service. Marketing can also create greater participation in a service as Wengler (2018) experienced by changing the name of an established end-of-semester social reference event to Research Parties.

Much of what was discovered in the literature applies to the nature of Research Parties and how students were engaging with the librarians and library services, from modeling information seeking behavior to providing a welcoming, accessible environment to marketing the event through the right channels. This inquiry adds another social, collaborative model of supplementary reference services to the mix while also affirming the overall value of reference services and student-librarian interactions.

Methods

Participants

Our initial assessment of the Research Party model included both attendance numbers and post-party librarian debriefings. In total, 177 undergraduate students attended 13 Research Parties from the fall semester of 2016 through the fall semester of 2018. Our highest attendance at a party was 31 and our lowest was 7 with an average of 13.6 students per event. Those consistent attendance numbers combined with our post-event debriefing notes and initial internal student assessment forms confirmed that this was a worthwhile model to continue.

In an effort to gather formal student feedback and demographic data we developed a brief survey (Appendix). The survey consisted of eight questions: six closed questions which gathered demographic data regarding the profiles of the undergraduate students who attended and how they heard about the events and two open-ended questions regarding their perceived value of the experience of working with a librarian in this manner. Prior to administering the survey, the instrument and protocol were reviewed and approved by the Penn State University Institutional Review Board. The survey was administered to students who attended the Spring 2017, Spring 2018 and Fall 2018 semester Research Parties. Before students left the Research Party, each was invited to participate in the survey which was available via Qualtrics on two computers in the event room. A total of 43 students completed the survey. While that number represents only 24 per cent of the total research party participants over all semesters, it represents 74 per cent (spring 2017), 70 per cent (spring 2018) and 78 per cent (fall 2018) of participants that attended the parties at which the survey was administered.

Data analysis

All responses were input into Excel. Quantitative demographic data were analyzed using simple statistical methods. The open-ended survey responses were analyzed and coded to identify emerging themes.

Results and discussion

Demographics

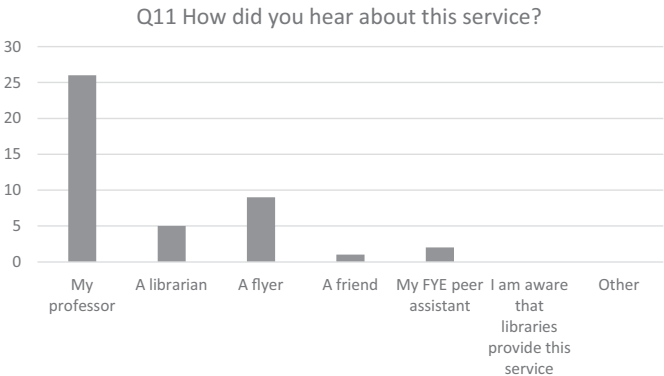
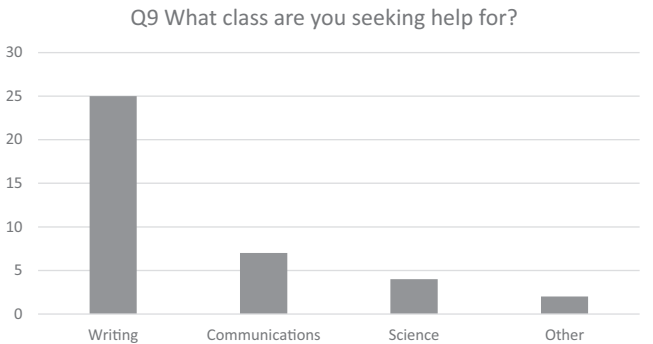
Of the 43 undergraduate students who completed the survey, the majority sought help for humanities courses, with a strong focus on writing and communications courses. Only four (9 per cent) of the respondents indicated they came seeking assistance for research in the sciences (Figure 1). In addition, the majority reported hearing about the Research Party service from their professor (Figure 2). Given that our strongest relationships with faculty are through the Writing Program because of the number of instruction sessions, this was not

Figure 1.
Of the classes that students sought help for at Research Parties, writing classes were by far the most popular

Figure 2.
Students overwhelmingly indicated that they heard about Research Parties from their professor

surprising. We have the added benefit of being able to send email to the faculty listserv, making direct-to-instructor marketing easy, important because this was our most critical factor in successful student attendance. Likewise, the literature indicated that marketing reference services created a greater usage of those services (Miles, 2013; Wengler, 2018). In addition, nearly half of respondents (21) indicated that their professors were awarding extra credit for their attendance, which provided another faculty-initiated incentive. Extra credit had little bearing on the comments from students about the usefulness of the interaction, but did provide some insight into our marketing approach. For those receiving extra credit, all but one heard about the Research Party from their professor, and when correlated to the courses for which those students attended, we could surmise that there were two principle professors with whom we had relationships who were sending their students. For those who were not receiving extra credit (22), 8 recorded that they had heard about the event from their professor while others mentioned printed flyers, a librarian or their first-year engagement seminar peer assistant. This reaffirms that faculty relationships are critical and other forms of outreach are also important for connecting with students who might benefit from librarian assistance.

One of our goals with the Research Party was to create a student-centered space and event that lowered the barriers for students to seek help from a librarian, particularly students that may not have known how to use librarians as resources. In an attempt to gauge whether Research Parties might have created a more approachable space, we asked



students ($n = 43$) if they had ever gotten help from a librarian before. Ten students (23 per cent) indicated that they had not. The other 33 had gotten help from a librarian before, either at the PI's institution, a public library, or their school library (Figure 3). Though we were glad to see that we had assisted some students who had never gotten help from a librarian before, these findings indicate that the majority of students who came to seek assistance at the Research Party already were already aware from prior experience of how librarians can assist them with their research, and therefore, conclusions about Research Parties as an approachable environment for students who do not know about how to seek research assistance cannot be determined from this data.

Research party
reference
model

Assessing value

In Q7, we asked respondents whether they found the conversation/chat/interaction with the librarian to be helpful. In total, 100 per cent of respondents ($n = 43$) indicated yes. This universal agreement that the Research Party interactions were helpful was what we had expected to hear; it had become obvious from the librarians and students' verbal and non-verbal communication that attending a Research Party was valuable. To better understand which aspects of Research Parties that students found helpful, respondents who answered yes were asked to give an open-ended response describing what they found most helpful about the conversation/chat/interaction.

Interaction met the student's information seeking need

Four major themes emerged after coding and analysis of the responses. The most common theme to emerge was students indicating that the interaction met their information need. Responses coded under this theme indicated an information need and how the librarian helped them find what they were looking for. Responses included a range of information needs such as finding sources, correcting citations, and navigating databases. In total, 28 students had comments that fell into this theme. These types of responses affirmed for the librarians that students were still receiving the assistance they needed despite this being a non-traditional model:

The Librarian helped me to find the specific scholarly articles that I was looking for and informed me on how to save certain articles and email them to myself.

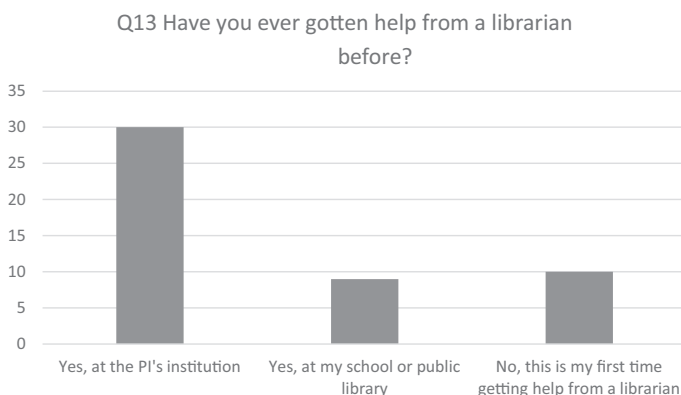


Figure 3.
The majority of
students who
attended research
parties had
previously received
help from a librarian

The most helpful part of the conversation is the guidance[sic] to use the online resources to find my topic and how to navigate through the website, also which resources to use and how to get citations[sic].

I was able to find books to benefit me as well as learn how to work the citation system.

These responses, at their most basic level, indicate a successful transaction between student and librarian, and correlate to the unanimous response of finding the interactions helpful. After all, the primary need of the interaction was met. Many of these 28 responses also fell into other coding themes, demonstrating that there was more to the interaction than a simple information need.

Librarian's disposition or attitude

Another significant theme that emerged were comments that described attributes of the librarian's disposition or attitude.

I found that the librarian's patience to be the most helpful about our conversation.

Information was very helpful and given with enthusiasm.

She was very helpful and kind.

[Redacted] is an excellent Librarian. She really nailed what I was having trouble with and provided great solutions.

These comments affirm that students value a positive, approachable disposition in librarians. While it is usually a librarian's goal to be friendly and approachable, we wondered if the social nature of the interaction may have lent itself to an atmosphere where the librarians were unhurried and dedicated to reference interactions with students, and could also talk with other librarians and students in the midst of the reference consultation. A librarian acting as a host at a party is perhaps more likely to be perceived as welcoming and open than one waiting at a reference desk engaged in other work where a student may think they are "interrupting" a librarian. Likewise, for the 23 per cent of respondents that had not worked with a librarian before, a positive first interaction could mean that they will seek help again.

Reflection on learning as process

An additional theme that emerged was the student reflecting on how the interaction changed how they would approach their scholarly work and habits in the future either in general or specifically in regard to returning to seek assistance. One student indicated that witnessing the librarian's process of moving from unknowing to knowing was helpful. Six of the students' comments fell into this theme:

Clarifying my general ideas, thoughts, and concerns. I typically think and think and think until I achieve a conclusion. This makes my writing very precise, but also at time[sic] difficult, or confusing for the reader. I learned I should more actively work to see what things I need to explain or define in my papers to keep my reader on an understandable path.

She helped me so much. She helped me outline my speech by helping me form a thesis and also help[sic] me form my main topics. Overall, will come back for more help in the future [...] so helpful.

The various sources that were introduced to me and how I could use these sources to help me understand the difficult materials that I learn in class. I definitely learned a lot of what I should do in order to make most of what I learn from my teacher and the material. And the encouragement to see my professor and ask her questions about the materials that I had trouble answering.

I spoke with [redacted] she was very helpful with my class paper. She also shared words of wisdom with me which really helped me push myself and believe that I can do this. I will be successful, it just takes time.

I found that the most helpful part of my conversation with the librarian was that while asking questions and searching she began to search with me and if she did happen to not know about a source she would search it herself and validate it for me.

These comments reflect an extension of the students' information needs in that they left the Research Party with more than they expected, such as assistance deciphering an assignment, clearer thinking, and a willingness and understanding about how to seek help. This level of engagement is reflective of [Schlak's \(2018\)](#) understanding of librarian-student engagement where librarians are educators and of [Simmons' \(2005\)](#) argument for librarians as mediators of academe. In these comments, students were reflective of their own learning process, and, though perhaps not explicitly, expressed a broader understanding of the assistance librarians provide.

Time-saving aspect of the interaction

Research Parties are marketed as 2-h drop-in anytime events with food. Though we have not collected formal data on how long the students stay, we have noticed that due to the side-by-side nature of the Research Party, many of the interactions tend to last longer than those at the reference desk. Though the length of the time spent in the reference space is longer, three students mentioned time as a factor of what made the interaction most helpful:

Open and honest ideas. Clear and concise.

She explained it to me in a way that was clear and understandable. I also enjoyed that she was able to answer all my questions and do it quickly.

The database is very helpful for us to learn more professional knowledge, and it will save lots of time.

Saving patron's time is a central factor in library service ([Ranganathan, 1931](#)) and continues to prove of value to college students when using reference services ([Martin and Park, 2010](#)). These comments indicate that even with this supplementary reference model that creates a space where students are welcome to stay as long as they need, saving time is still valuable to students and something they felt like the Research Party model allowed for.

Limitations and future research

This study consisted of a small convenience sample from one college. The results are useful for examining the potential of a new model such as this, but they are ultimately not generalizable. Students took the survey immediately after the interaction, and therefore, the results do not capture short- or long-term impressions, just immediate feedback. Likewise, because students who agreed to do the survey were self-selecting, those with positive interactions may have been more likely to complete the survey and negative feedback may

not have been captured. In addition, for Q7, only students who had indicated that the Research Party was not helpful were able to offer suggestions on what could have been done to make the interaction helpful in Q8. Because 100 per cent of the respondents indicated the interaction was helpful, we had no feedback as to what could have been done differently to improve the Research Party interactions. The survey could be revised to capture this information. The instrument was developed by the researchers and is not a standard instrument tool.

Likewise, this study did not specifically examine the unique aspects of Research Parties to assess their particular effectiveness. For example, students did not comment that working alongside or being in a room with other students made them feel more comfortable or helped them to better understand their assignment or guided them to a different understanding of research. The survey did not ask about this aspect of Research Parties, and therefore, additional investigation about the presence of other students may be useful for distinguishing a Research Party's effectiveness in comparison to other models such as in-office consultations. To create a more in-depth study that would address these gaps, we would design a study that would solicit feedback from students who used reference services in different formats to distinguish how the unique aspects of Research Parties impacted the students' research practices, their feelings about research and their views on the social nature of the reference interaction.

Despite those limitations, the overwhelmingly positive responses to this new model warrant future studies of both the model itself and the value of this model for different student populations at this and other institutions. Future studies looking at short- and long-term outcomes for students who attend Research Parties would also be valuable. For short-term outcomes, comparative citation analysis of papers from one class, where some students attended Research Parties and others did not, might aid in quantifying the effectiveness of assistance received at the event. Long-term outcomes may be assessed by following up with students in a qualitative study to inquire about the usefulness of what they learned as they progress through their college years, or how Research Parties might have affected their relationship with the library. Likewise, particular aspects of Research Parties that make them unique, such as an approachable or social space, might be examined directly. For example, roving reference may be an interesting comparison as another model of reference that moves away from the barrier of approaching a desk. In addition, further investigation into the question of librarian attitudes could be warranted to see if acting as a host at a party versus waiting at a desk changes the librarian's disposition or to examine librarians' perceived value of the interactions in different reference settings.

Conclusion

Our goals for Research Parties matched closely with the goals of student engagement and libraries outlined by [Schlak \(2018, p. 137\)](#). We hoped to provide a space where students could engage more deeply in their own learning, where we could build relationships with students instead of simply providing them with information and where the work of librarians becomes more visible. We achieved these goals on all fronts.

Students found value in the reference services provided by librarians. This is unsurprising given the literature and that all of the students attending Research Parties were coming to us for help finding information. Our assistance with that primary task was of the greatest value to them. They also benefitted from positive interactions with librarians, different outlooks on their own abilities and developing a familiarity with the services librarians provide so they could seek repeat assistance.

Our survey provided data that this model of reference works because it meets students' needs, but whether it works better or worse than other models of reference has not been determined. One clear finding is that the event was successful because it was a marketed reference service. Students came because they knew about the service, mostly from faculty. If traditional reference services were marketed this way, would there be a decline? The event-based nature makes it easy for instructors to give a referral to attend an event.

As a supplementary model of reference, Research Parties are worth exploring. Parties could be geared to specific groups for students, for example, students living in residence halls. Likewise, while Research Parties originated in an undergraduate library, they may be also be a useful outreach program for school libraries or even public libraries who work with local school populations. Public libraries, likewise, might consider holding Research Parties for other members of their constituencies, such as local business owners or those looking to conduct genealogical research. Research Parties are designed to provide reference assistance, to help a constituency better understand how librarians can help and what resources are available and to function as a space to foster community and observational learning.

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Appendix. Survey instrument

- (1) You worked with a librarian today. Did you:
 - Visit a desk in the library to ask for help
 - Stop by a librarian's office
 - Schedule an appointment with a librarian
 - Attend a Research Party
- (2) Are you getting extra credit for this visit to a librarian
 - Yes
 - No
- (3) What class are you seeking help for?
 - ENGL 015
 - CAS 100
 - ENGL 202A
 - ENGL 202B
 - ENGL 202C
 - ENGL 202D
 - Other [open text response]

(4) How did you hear about this service?

- My professor
- A librarian
- A flyer
- A friend
- My FYE peer assistant
- I am aware that librarians provide this service
- Other [open text response]

Research party
reference
model

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(5) Have you ever gotten help from a librarian before? *Check all that apply.*

- Yes, at Penn State Abington
- Yes, at my school or public library
- No, this is my first time getting help from a librarian

(6) Did you find your conversation/chat/interaction with the librarian to be helpful?

- Yes
- No

(7) What did you find most helpful about our conversation/chat/interaction? [open text response]

(8) What could have been done to make this interaction with the librarian helpful? [open text response]

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