

# Technology and Tradition

## Managing technology requests using basic library science techniques

By Jill A. Smith

It is a truth reduced almost to a cliché that library patrons often come to the reference desk convinced they know the correct information to find a resource only to find out that they are wrong in almost every particular. A classic article on the subject, “Oranges and Peaches: Understanding Communication Accidents in the Reference Interview,” contains the story of a student who comes to the reference desk of a university library seeking a volume called *Oranges and Peaches* that cannot be found in the catalog. An inquiry by the librarian uncovers the fact that the material in question is the seminal work on evolution, and she correctly deduces that the student really needs Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

Technology requests are subject to the same sort of confusion and misinformation. A request for a webinar or collaboration tool (to use only two examples) can mean many different things to many different people. In addition, since the terminology to describe technology is evolving alongside technology itself, assertions that begin with, “I need a . . .” are often followed by labels that do not accurately describe the underlying need any more than a patron request for *Buster Keaton on Torts* or *Brown’s Law Dictionary* would automatically yield a meaningful result.

Libraries are becoming increasingly involved in the provision of technology to their patrons. This may be due to a number of factors, including technology’s increasing importance to the storage, cataloging, preservation, and dissemination of information; the shifting focus of library schools to include technology throughout their curricula; and the natural curiosity and enthusiasm of librarians as a professional class. As an institutional matter, technology and librarianship continue to overlap as well. It is common, for instance, for IT departments in law schools to report to the director of the library.

As we continue to use more technology in our daily work and assist our patrons with using these tools, examining the skills and practices that traditional librarianship can contribute to a technology discussion may be a useful exercise. My own job description specifically calls on me to research, consult on, and assist in implementing academic technology, but it is clear to me that librarians’ native curiosity and eagerness to assist others can naturally lead them to be technological problem-solvers even if that role is not part of their official job descriptions.

### Reference Interviews

Just as a reference interview is crucial to identifying the information a patron actually seeks as opposed to the reference work the patron believes is needed, sorting out a technology request frequently requires redirecting an inquiry toward the *task* to be accomplished and away from the *tool* originally requested.

The details can matter tremendously when recommending one technology over another for what superficially sounds like the same request. Take webinars as an example: in practical effect, a request for a “webinar” can actually mean anything from a simple telephonic conference call with advance distribution of slides by email to a complex, web-based video conference among hundreds of participants with presenter-controlled slides, multiple methods of asking the presenter a question, and archiving of the presentation for later viewing. Determining the real need and the best tool to achieve the desired result can be a complicated calculation based on factors

such as expectations, budget, and the technological acumen of the person making the request.

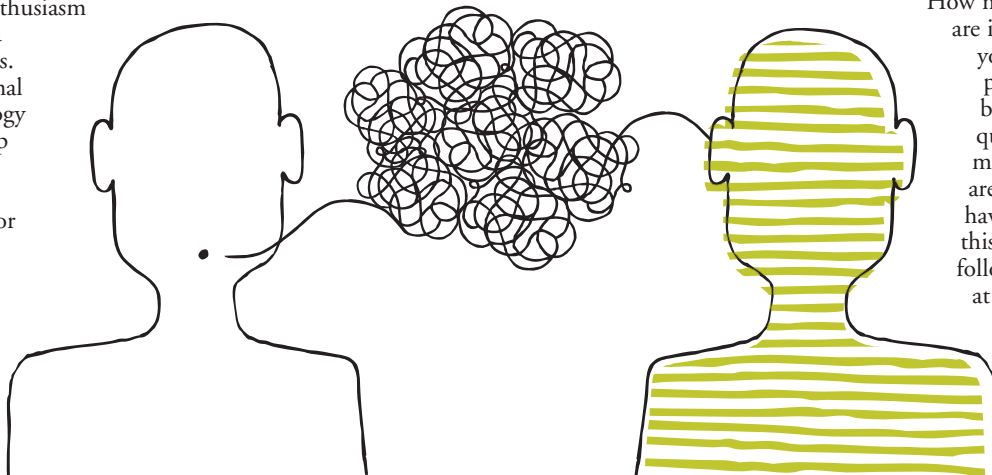
As librarians, we are accustomed to using the reference interview as a means to peel back layers of poor recollection, unintelligible notes, and outright misinformation. By dialing a query back to the point of finding out what is *required* and differentiating that from what is *asked for*, we can find the real answers our patrons seek. Thus, the same tool that turns “I need a book called *Oranges and Peaches*” into “Here is *On the Origin of Species*” can also turn “I need a webinar” into “Let me get you a Skype account and show you how to use it.”

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Conducting a technology reference interview has all the hallmarks of a more traditional reference interview: patrons may insist that you “just get me the thing I asked for,” they may be embarrassed by their own lack of a clear idea of what they want, or they may have tried other avenues before seeking your help and already be frustrated and confused. The keys to solving these problems are the same in the tech suite as they are at the reference desk: patience, good humor, and basic questions. Instead of saying, “What sort of webinar would you like?” it is wiser

to start with something such as, “I’d love to help you.

How many people are involved? Do you want the participants to be able to ask questions? How many presenters are there? Do you have a budget for this?” Targeted follow-up questions at an early stage can also help you manage



expectations down the line, as the person making the request may begin to get more of an idea of the potential complexity of the enterprise early on. If you get a lot of these sorts of requests, developing a questionnaire to ease and organize planning is essential.

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Other players outside your organization can introduce further complications. In the case of technology used to collaborate or communicate, you may need to assess not only your own resources but also those of someone outside your institution. For instance, if Skype looks like it will meet your user's needs, you have to make sure that the other party involved not only has a Skype account of his or her own but also that the party has access to a computer with a camera and microphone. If you are bringing an outside presenter into your institution using technology, the outside presenter's ability to use the technology must be ascertained. If necessary, you may have to secure technical assistance from the outside party's IT team to keep things running smoothly.

### Environmental Scanning

Having conducted your reference interview, you also need to know what resources are available to match the user's request, what the level of expertise required to use them is, and how much they cost. For this, another basic library technique comes into play: environmental scanning, or the art of looking around to see what tools are out there.

Blogs can be used as powerful discovery tools for new technological resources; Profhacker at the Chronicle of Higher Education ([chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker](http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker)) and Sue Frantz's excellent blog, Technology for Educators ([suefrantz.com](http://suefrantz.com)), are two such examples. Free software and web services are also increasingly common and effective. To minimize searching and save time, I keep a running database of resources that I uncover and where they can be found to facilitate future requests. Wherever possible, testing tools you uncover will also enable you to tailor recommendations to specific needs and user abilities.

Here are a few of my favorite free tools:

- **Audacity:** Audacity is an audio recording and editing suite that offers users an impressive array of effects and tools. Audacity can export files to a number of different formats, including MP3, WAV, and AAC. In the academic environment, this application is perfect for making up lost class time by creating podcasts.
- **Dropbox:** Dropbox creates a synchronized, password-protected folder that is available from multiple computers. When a computer is offline, the documents are still available as local copies saved to the hard drive. When the computer comes online again, it automatically syncs any changes from the hard drive to the Dropbox server, and those changes in turn sync to other computers when they come online. You can share specific subfolders without endangering the security of the rest of your account. Dropbox even lets you undelete a file for 30 days. It is ideal for enabling someone to work on a project from multiple locations without emailing files or keeping track of flash drives or for collaborators working together on a project.

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- **Jing:** Jing is a fully featured screen capture application that not only enables you to snap and annotate still images but also does full-motion screen capture with automatic output into Flash. You can then embed the Flash movies into a presentation or share them at a free screencast.com account. Jing helps me provide clear, effective technical support and assistance from my desktop.
- **Meetingburner:** A new entry into the remote-presentation field, Meetingburner is a simple, cleanly designed, web-based tool that allows presenters to share their desktop and be visible to their audience on webcam. While there are many applications for accomplishing this task, this is perhaps the easiest to use that I have found.

- **Prezi:** Prezi provides a web-based suite of tools to create presentations that look nothing like Powerpoint. Utilizing a zoom-and-pan approach rather than a slide-by-slide approach, Prezi can make distinctive, dynamic presentations and requires a very small learning curve to master.

### Assessment

Just as library services need to be assessed by surveys and other feedback tools, technology applications should be reviewed for their effectiveness. No two user interactions are alike, and no matter how much a particular technology tool is tested, new problems (or even benefits) can be discovered by your users.

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A discussion or survey conducted shortly after the event for one-time uses, or throughout the life cycle for longer projects, can help alert you to potential pitfalls or limitations for future applications of the same technology. The results can be brought to bear in the next technology reference interview you conduct. Likewise, when new products arrive on the scene that are superior to the ones you have been using, the librarian's ruthless talent for weeding can come into play to keep the virtual collection of resources in order.

### No Need for New

When working with technology, the notion that only new solutions will serve to connect users to answers is an easy trap to fall into. However, by bringing the most traditional of library science techniques to bear on the application of current technology, librarians can help their user bases achieve their goals and also publicly demonstrate the effectiveness of their training and value to their institutions. ■

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