

Book Review (Journal of Web Librarianship)

The Human Side of Reference and Information Services in Academic Libraries: Adding value in the digital world

- Edited by Lesley S.J. Farmer
- Chandos Publishing, 2007

Amid all the Library 2.0 enthusiasm, we can focus on technology's bells and whistles to the detriment of its usefulness. There is a place for new discoveries and for "how to do it" manuals, but in the end we must consider how to best serve our patrons with the resources at hand. The Human Side of Reference and Information Services in Academic Libraries addresses this within the specific context of the academic library reference department. It emphasizes a library-wide philosophy of utilizing technology alongside traditional services to provide the best solution for a diverse academic community. Farmer stresses the significance of the librarian's role, for "all the technology in the world will not ensure high-quality academic reference services without an equally high-quality human deployment" (xiii).

Each chapter considers a single reference topic rather than a single technology, and broadly considers how technology can enhance, not replace, the traditional services that librarians provide. The chapter titles clearly indicate their focus: technology's impact on specific aspects of reference services. Each chapter provides a mini case-study that effectively illustrates its concepts. The frequent use of bulleted lists and the text's clear, simple style make the book a practical guide for reference service assessment.

Farmer's presence as not only editor, but also contributor to each chapter creates a cohesive vision throughout the volume. This differs from the common library-literature practice of collecting similarly-themed essays by various authors in a single volume, such as Digital versus Non-Digital Reference. While that approach is suited to case studies of specific technological implementations, Farmer's focused approach applies a common philosophy to each chapter. The text progresses through various aspects of reference services by considering how technology has impacted each. Also unique for a volume about technology and reference is its focus on academic libraries. By considerably narrowing its audience, the text effectively targets methods of serving the entire academic community. Farmer's background in information literacy is communicated throughout by the emphasis on collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty.

The text considers such various topics as collection development, physical access, value-added services, information literacy, and assessment. Of particular interest is the section on staffing. Farmer and DuBois stress the importance of selecting individuals who work collaboratively and are passionate about learning. They point out that while technological knowledge is desirable, the key is to find staff that are versatile and open to change. They also stress that support staff as well as librarians need to be trained in a wide variety of technologies, and that training should be ongoing for all staff. For specific areas of technical expertise, such as web development, they recommend hiring experienced individuals.

The focus of this volume is not illustrating specific technologies and their applications. Rather, it is a holistic library guide that considers how technology can enhance traditional library services. It is a helpful resource for academic reference librarians, particularly those interested in information literacy, and its broad approach ensures its relevancy to techie and newbie alike. Subject specialists will find a plethora of helpful content, such as the appendix checklist for evaluating reference resources and ideas for integrating bibliographic instruction into university courses. However, its broad scope makes it ideally suited for library administrators. It is a valuable resource for any academic library's collection.

~ Starr Hoffman, Librarian for Digital Collections, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, TX