

Reference in the 21st Century By Deanna Draper

In March the Washington County Library Reference division invited Joseph Janes of the University of Washington Information School to talk to reference librarians in the Portland Metro area about the future of reference service. As a founder of the Internet Public Library when he was a University of Michigan and a regular columnist for **American Libraries**, Janes is a leader for reference librarians & service. As an on call (substitute) reference librarian for the Beaverton City Library, I had the privilege of attending a very interesting talk.

After giving a brief history & definition of reference service dating back to an 1876 article by Sam Greene in the first volume of **Library Journal** to advice from Margaret Hutchins in 1944, Janes pointed out that reverence service hasn't changed. Its purpose still is to help patrons find information. What have changed are the information environment and the composition of society. The population is aging & diversifying. In the schools, the kids' ages might not change, but the demographics of the students are definitely diversifying.

Our students (and adults) have adopted Google because it's free, easy, quick & "good enough." They are not very concerned with privacy & intellectual freedom. They sometimes view libraries as boring and difficult, just places with books.

However, books are evolving. The container in which the book lives has changed from print only to audio books, e-books and the "Kindle."

So, what are we to do? Our students still need help finding the "right stuff." However, as web surfers, Internet searchers, social networkers, bloggers, and digital object creators, they are reluctant to look to the school library teacher for help. Too often the students rely on the "free" information on Google or Wikipedia. Their teachers may say they can't use the Internet for a project & they get confused, thinking they can't use the excellent databases available through OSLIS and other consortia. We need to offer "value added" service to our students & teachers, to be available & accessible, offering quality, depth, advice, and guidance. Most importantly, we need to be publicizing, instructing & advertising our value added service.

Make you own blog, wiki, MySpace or other networking device to attract your students. Build tools that the kids can find easily when they are not in the library. Somehow, we need to replicate Google in our school library world. Or, as Janes said, "we have to be better online than in person." Whatever we do has to make sense to "them" and to "us."

We need to convey the idea of the "library media center" as not just a physical place but also a digital place, open 24-7. Janes calls it the "E-Branch." Remember, we are the center for information in the 21st century school.

Deanna Draper works in the educational media department of Portland State University and occasionally reaches into the real world of school libraries in Beaverton.