

LIBR 289 e-Portfolio  
Fall 2008

Evidence for Competency I

LIBR 210 – Reference & Information Services

Virtual Reference Desk Assignment

March 21, 2005

Running Head: VRD EXPERIENCE

Reaction Paper to VRD Experience

by

Mildred Arencibia

San Jose State University

LIBR 210

The Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) is a commendable effort on the part of the library community that serves information professionals and others who are interested in digital reference. It is sponsored by the US Department of Education, and it is dedicated to the development of digital reference and the establishment of human-mediated, internet-based information services.

As part of this commitment to the public, the VRD has a Learning Center that offers help with reference questions to virtual patrons. Questions are claimed by experts, who could be librarians, information professionals or library and information science students. They would in turn research the questions and post a response within a few days.

Recently I had to be trained and later on participate as an expert for the VRD. This was a very humbling experience and one that made me develop a new respect for reference librarians. To be able to craft thorough and concise answers to a question is exhausting.

First, there is the issue of providing credible information. For my searches I tried to use resources such as directories, almanacs and encyclopedias recommended by our textbook. Looking up information on a search engine might be faster but the quality of the information may be compromised. In the process I gained new knowledge on different resources that are available, many times free of charge, for research.

Secondly, I had to make a concerted effort to remain neutral on a subject when crafting a reply while making sure that I provided different points of view that could aid the patron to form his or her own opinion. This was particularly true when answering the second training question that inquired about my opinion on the subject of assisted medical death versus keeping someone on a persistent vegetative state.

Thirdly, I kept trying to live to the expectation of the “perfect answer.” I am sure I am not the only one who looks up to librarians as fountains of knowledge and trusted sources of information. As I composed the answers to the reference questions, I kept reviewing them over and over to make sure that they sounded authoritative, accurate, and unbiased. The lesson learned was that reference librarians have an enormous responsibility to provide reliable information to the public.

Finally, on a more positive note, I really enjoy doing research on the questions and have learned quite a bit myself about different subjects. Sometimes hours go by as I browse catalogs, directories, almanacs, websites, and encyclopedias looking for the perfect resources to refer the patron to.

Overall I really enjoyed the VRD experience. In fact, it has turned to be a personal obsession of mine to log in to the VRD on a daily basis and browse the new questions that have arrived. I have also answered quite a bit of them and find it difficult to stop! I guess, it is the librarian spirit inside of me that pushes me to continue and try to enhance the channels of information access, and help people learn more every day. The fact that I am joined by experts from around the country, if not the world, to serve the needs of the population makes it very purposeful and enjoyable.