Making the invisible visible:  
Public library reference service as epistemic practice

by

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Abstract

Public library services are evolving in response to the changing informational needs and behaviours of the citizens of the knowledge society. Reference statistics are declining and the move to self-service, virtual reference and an increasing use of mediating information and communication technologies calls into question the ongoing role of human, face-to-face information interaction at the public library’s front-line reference “desk”.

An ethnographic case study of face-to-face adult reference service was conducted in a large Canadian urban public library. Over 8 months during 2006, a pilot study was conducted, followed by 170 hours of observations at the reference desks in three branch libraries of varying sizes and semi-structured interviews with front-line reference staff, library managers and reference service clients. 480 reference interactions were documented and policy documents were reviewed. An inductive staged process of analytical abstraction, a narrative approach to the interpretations and a critical reflexivity as participant researcher were employed.

The main contribution of this study is the articulation of a practice framework for understanding and studying the reference service within the public library as organization. Sharing knowledge, finding meaning and learning are the outcomes of this epistemic
practice. A typology of four reference encounters characterized in three dimensions of interpersonal communication; information exchange and mode of practice is detailed. This study challenges previous interpretations of reference services as a transactional, unitized question-answer activity and depicts it in a larger context as an interactional, relational set of activities that altogether characterize an epistemic practice. The three dimensions of structure (library organization), agency (reference staff and clients) and objects (library collections) anchor this conceptual framework – they are interdependent dimensions interacting to illuminate a robust understanding of face-to-face reference service. This study responds to previous research in which the reference process is studied separately from its social practice and its structural-organizational contexts.
Acknowledgments

During my 20 year library career I have worked with many valued library colleagues across Canada, in Saskatchewan and Ontario in particular. I have been exposed to their exemplary practices, to occasionally heated and more often sympathetic discussions of core library management issues and most importantly I have seen regular evidence of their unwavering commitment to making their libraries more relevant for their communities. I hope this thesis adds to those conversations.

I have also been privileged to be a regularly welcomed and respected member of the Faculty of Information (Studies) community at the University of Toronto – I note in particular the collegial support of Nalini Singh and the Inforum staff. I would like to remember Ethel Auster as an impressively prescient doctoral students’ advisor during my tenure. Student colleagues with whom I shared this metamorphosis most closely include Greta Golick, Luanne Freund, Lisa Daulby, Jean Dryden, Danielle Allard, Susan MacDonald, and the ‘boys’ around the corner – Herman van den Berg, Scott Paquette and Colin Furness. I would like to thank Barb Love, Louise Reimer, Cheryl Stenstrom and Deborah Defoe for responding to my regular calls for “real-world” perspective. As mentors and friends with related interests, Leslie Weir and Ard Huizing and his de Maatschap colleagues have generously shared with me, their experiences and experiments with teaching, learning and the academic process.

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Since I first met Chun Wei Choo and Lynne Howarth at a KM institute in the late 1990’s, I have been inspired by their research, experience and ideas around knowledge, organizations and the role of libraries. They have been quintessential Socratic teachers and supervisors throughout – guiding me with wit, generous with their ideas and always ready with more challenging questions when the answers seemed too simple.

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Chapter One
Setting the study context

Could library services be made more meaningful? …the primary impact of library materials is through the meanings they have for our minds. They influence our knowledge, our beliefs, and our attitudes. How could we understand better how meaningful library services are for the individual? (Buckland, 1988, pp. 677-678)

The similarity of perceptions about libraries and their resources across respondents from six countries is striking. It suggests that libraries are seen by information consumers as a common solution, a single organization—one entity with many outlets—constant, consistent, expected. The “Library” is, in essence, a global brand: a brand dominated by nostalgia and reinforced by common experience. (OCLC, Perceptions of Libraries & Information Resources, 2005, p.6-8)

As arms-length municipal government services, public libraries are under similar funding restraints as those pressuring Canada’s largest cities. Structural funding and taxation inequity, combined with a dynamic information and communications technology, new approaches to public sector governance and demands for accountability, and increasing user expectations, are driving public libraries to make strategic changes and to reposition their organization and their services (Bertot, McClure et al, 2007; Goulding, 2006; Kapitzke & Bruce, 2006).

Throughout the 1990’s public institutions were required to respond to increased ideological shifts to a "market-led" (Durrance & Fisher, 2005; Greenhalgh, Landry et al, 1993) approach to government services and the attendant economic pressures from government, and were called upon to demonstrate their value or contribution through traditionally private, market-driven approaches to service delivery and evaluation. Major library surveys (Benton Foundation, 1996; Greenhalgh, Landry & Worpole, 1995; Fitch & Warner, 1997) conducted in Canada, United States and UK during this period document this ideological shift explicitly in their recommendations. Moreover, many libraries themselves have also supported this market-driven approach in part to address new forms of competition, initially from modern bookstores such as Chapters/Indigo and Amazon, and more recently from Google and the Internet and in part, to respond to the political requirement for greater accountability. As Greenhalgh et al (1995) characterize the period, the library’s political direction has moved away from a “client empowerment” perspective, towards a new brand of "consumer-sovereignty" (p.29). This market model of the private
sector that gained momentum in the 1990’s, continues to dominate frameworks for public services today.

In addition to the political imperative to adopt more competitive and market oriented values, public libraries have also been occupied finding their place in the new social structure the “knowledge society” driven by the “knowledge economy.”\footnote{Unless noted otherwise, throughout this study, the term “knowledge society” is used as it was defined by Drucker (1993) in Post-capitalist society in which he contrasts the earlier 20\textsuperscript{th} century industrial society founded on technology with the current management revolution where knowledge has become the critical form of production, “sidelining both capital and labor” (p. 52, 1993b). “Knowledge- economy” originating with Machlup (1962) and more recently defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD, 1996) is understood as an economy that encourages its organisations to acquire, create, disseminate and use codified and tacit knowledge more effectively for greater economic and social development.} With some exceptions, today’s typical (and traditional) urban public library is experiencing limited growth in terms of primary output measures - collection circulation and reference transactions whereas the library is experiencing increased use of its expanding selection of digital library services (Canadian public library statistics, 2006). Budget reductions by local government have compelled library boards to limit service developments; major funding for capital projects such as new buildings or major renovations to existing service points has also been restricted in many municipalities and threats of library closures continue to occur (Koontz & Jue, 2007).

The other major pressure on public libraries during this period also as a result of the global shift to a knowledge economy has come from the introduction of the Internet, the web and related information and communication technologies (ICT) including recent web 2.0 social networking applications. More and more traditional public library users now look to the Internet and the web to fill their immediate simple and complex information gaps. The Internet provides access to an enormous amount of unfiltered, primary information quickly and easily 24 hours a day. While libraries may have a web presence, knowledge assets including library collections and staff specifically account for between 60 and 88 percent of the twenty–five largest Canadian urban public libraries’ budgets (Canadian public library statistics, 2006); the large majority spend more than 70 percent of their budget in these two areas. Why should tax-payers vote to increase or even sustain the same funding of public libraries when the Internet is such a powerful, alternative information source? Does the public library participate in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century knowledge society in relevant ways?

Positively stated, each of these problems or pressures on today’s public libraries – a competitive market-orientation, the transition to a dynamic knowledge and learning
economy, and adaptation to the competitive Internet information environment – presents opportunities for the traditional public library to revisit its institutional identity and to introduce innovation into its strategic plan and service developments. Typically these pressures are being addressed in the political arenas and planning exercises often through a consolidated network-wide emphasis on the library’s contribution to its individual community’s social and economic development. In Canada, the United States and the UK, public library networks are taking similar approaches and although the language differs slightly, the core concepts and tactics are strikingly similar. Recently three major public library networks – the UK’s Museums, Archives & Libraries Council, the Southern Ontario Library Service and the North American Urban Libraries Council - have released research reports and planning documents describing and prescribing how libraries should and do contribute to their local economic development of this knowledge economy.\(^2\)

Based on their survey and fieldwork in a selection of UK public libraries, Clayton & Hepworth (2006) note three major findings which are also echoed in the North American reports: 1) public libraries “because of their powerful base of ‘customer capital’ are increasingly seen as ‘natural partners’ in economic development” (p.4); 2) public libraries are “critical ‘bridge builders’ in providing access to learning and skills development for hard to reach groups” (p.3) and 3) public libraries “are important generators of intangible capital in the knowledge economy” (p. 2). These assertions about the library’s value (generating intangible capital and customer capital) and their broad role (bridge builders) in the present day knowledge-based society are presented in language and concepts which are ideologically and theoretically oriented in the now common private sphere of competition and market economics. Even if we were to accept this ideological orientation (which is philosophically different from the library’s historical roles and values)\(^3\) because municipal politicians demand it, what are the implications in practical terms, for the library’s original core services – organizing and making knowledge accessible, (building collections and

\(^2\) There have been many similar kinds of reports released during the past decade. A selection of major sponsored research and reports come from: The Urban Libraries Council released *Making cities stronger: public library contributions to local economic development* (2007); the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council of the UK released *Public libraries in the knowledge economy* (2006); the Southern Ontario Library Service, funded by the Government of Ontario is preparing the second edition of their manual on *Library contributions to your community* (2000); and the Canadian Library Association is also currently updating its report on library contributions to communities, *Dividends: The value of public libraries in Canada* (1997). OCLC’s report, *Perceptions of libraries and information resources* (2005) presents results of their extensive online user survey on the “library brand”.

\(^3\) These social and civic roles underlining the democratic philosophical tradition of public libraries are discussed widely. Two comprehensive histories of public libraries as social institutions are recommended for further reading: in the United States, see Martin (1998) and regarding public libraries in the UK, see Black (2000).
lending) and mediating information services to their patrons (reference)? And how could we better understand how these core processes or practices through which public libraries might create and contribute ‘intangible capital’ and ‘customer capital’ into their communities?

1.1 Research problem

Thus public libraries are faced with three inter-related problems launched by the introduction of the knowledge economy. First, public libraries need to understand and get consensus from their communities about their role in this knowledge society. Second, public libraries need to integrate both their traditional and evolving virtual services into the technology-based information environment to maintain their relevancy and in so doing, maintain public and political support. Finally, libraries need to continue to creatively pursue means to engage their communities of citizens in this 21st century context and strengthen these learning and information relationships.

Against this larger knowledge economy landscape, this dissertation is presented as an ethnographic case study exploring the public library reference desk as a potential microcosm of the library’s social knowledge sharing space. The research problem within this larger perspective addressed by this dissertation may be stated in this way:

**Research problem**

In the context of the knowledge society, public libraries report that their communities’ demands for reference and information service are changing due to the increased availability of online information; national and international trends indicate that these services are generally experiencing declining use.

Further, public libraries are looking for new ways to organize their services and thus provide value for their core services such as the reference service to their citizens and to their political decision-makers who are increasingly defining government services using market-based models.

More research on how services are being used, organized, managed and evaluated in this context is thus needed to inform these decisions.

1.2 Outline of Dissertation

1.2.1 Research questions

There are many possible paths to making this public library problem a manageable study goal. In the spirit of exploratory research whose aim in the first instance is to achieve “thick
description” (Geertz, 1972, p.3f), the public library is characterized provisionally as a knowing organization using Choo’s (2006) framework in The Knowing Organization as the initial point of theoretical departure and using the face-to-face mediated reference desk as the site or field of study. Study objectives emanating from this goal are a) to describe the types of knowledge present at the public library reference desk and b) to understand and describe how this knowledge is ‘at work’ in the provision of reference using sensemaking, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing as the guiding information processes and c) to understand the organizational culture insofar as it influences the knowledge processes at the reference desk. To address these objectives in a research study, the following questions are presented to guide this project.

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<td>Q1. What types of knowledge are created, shared and used by library staff and their clients in the provision of reference service, in urban public libraries?</td>
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<td>Q2. What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients’ reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3. What role, if any, do the public library (as organization) and the branch library reference unit’s beliefs, values and organizational culture both documented and enacted, play in knowledge sharing and use processes between and among library reference staff and their clients?</td>
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1.2.2 Understanding the landscape
A literature review presented in Chapter Two is structured according to four public library dimensions: the library’s identity and values, the library as a public and social space, the library as knowledge organization and finally the human dimension of the library. Within each of these areas the tensions and gaps in the research and theory are introduced, and then applied directly to the public library and the reference practice. A conceptual framework in Chapter Three theoretically characterizes this public library as “knowing organization.” The reference desk practice is the site where this characterization is explored. Three interpretive spheres of influence are identified as they potentially affect the

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4 Throughout this study, the term “knowing organization” is used as a theoretical concept and framework based on the work of Choo (1998; 2006) in The knowing organization: How organizations use information to construct meaning, create knowledge and make decisions and is not repeated in each instance.
reference practice and they are: the library as organization, the library’s communities and clients and the library’s political and ideological authorities.

1.2.3 Approaching the problem
This study is set within the qualitative, naturalistic research paradigm as an extended ethnographic case study (Burawoy, 1998), employing obtrusive participant observation, narrative interviewing and document analysis as the primary research methods described in detail in Chapter Four. It is a “case of the public library’s reference practice” as it is presented in three branches and one branch as pilot site, of one Canadian urban public library. During 170 hours of observation at the reference desks of three branch libraries of this system, 480 reference encounters were observed and documented. Through an iterative process of analytic induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), reference transactions, interactions and relationships are explored and described. The organizational culture as it is articulated in semi-structured interviews with library front-line staff and by management, is explored as it exposes occasions for the organization to strategically adapt its reference practice.

1.2.4 Discovering meanings
Building from the smallest transactional entity to the more complex interactions, Chapter Five addresses the reference transaction reconceptualised as a reference interaction which, over time, forms the basis of information relationships between clients and reference desk staff. The characterization of the reference interactions as transactional, systematic, interactional and social offers library managers new potential for describing and valuing this service. Implications of this re-conceptualization for a re-structuring of the reference practice are also briefly discussed. The reference service as information practice in Chapter Six builds on findings on the transactional/interactional interpretations from Chapter Five and introduces information reference practice and information relationships using relational attributes including time, disclosure, trust, confidentiality and invisibility to characterize these relationships. The culture and sub-cultures of this public library organization as they influence organizational learning, identity and decision-making are revealed in findings presented through an organizational story. The unified story of these narratives suggests that the staff and public perception of the library’s identity, beliefs and values is changing. Library management is being challenged to re-structure the reference desk practice in a financially viable and meaningful integration of professional librarianship expertise and
relevant object-centered information and communications technologies. However, management conceptualizes and staff enact two different meanings of the reference service, and this tension is a source of some organizational challenge. Chapter Seven presents a discussion of these meanings and revises the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Three. This revised framework characterizes reference service as an epistemic practice in a mediating position between the library organization and the boundary reference service with library clients and staff. Epistemic practice is enacted through the interdependent interactions of the library organization as structure, staff and client human agents and library collections as knowledge objects in an interdependent relationship, an irreducible whole and is defined as:

Reference service as epistemic practice is the ongoing interaction of the reference staff and client agents and the library’s knowledge objects with the library as structure where agents are oriented towards learning. This practice is regularly enacted and contested through various types of a) reference encounters; b) information relationships; and c) local library rules, routines, and branch library cultures.

This thesis concludes with reflections on the library as organization in the knowledge society and calls on the organization to be more oriented towards practice and learning. Research contributions and implications for future work are briefly discussed.
Chapter Two
Literature Review

Having more than 15 years of direct experience in the practice of public librarianship, I first approached the problem described in Chapter One by setting out to immerse myself in the “theory” of the public library\(^5\) in the belief that if I could locate the public library in its theoretical setting, I could understand its current challenges more deeply and formulate a stronger research study to address one or more of these challenges. Alongside this theoretical quest, I have maintained my very pragmatic perspective based on my work experiences over the years. Among the questions I brought to the literature review were:

What are the unique and defining characteristics of a public library – what is its fundamental organizational purpose and structure? What are the larger philosophical, social and political notions behind the most common ‘motherhood’ rhetoric? What is the library’s relationship to and with knowledge, specifically tacit or subjective, experiential knowledge? Is a public library still a library if it is only its collections and without librarians as mediators? What is to be learned about the public library as organization that might inform its present and future managers and decision-makers? Beyond the superficial and impulsive reactions to change, what is the nature of the library’s relationship to information technologies and to its community?

The results of my search were in some ways as disappointing as they were meagre. The public library commands much rhetoric and iconically, it is the library that is often being addressed in the research. While there are many how-to handbooks to guide practitioners, there is less theory-building research that informs the public library as its own unique informational and organizational entity. And while all aspects of library and information science (LIS)\(^6\) theory touch public library work, relatively little theory is the unique domain of public libraries; but of course there are also important exceptions to this larger observation, and perhaps this conclusion is to be expected given the very practical nature of the organization and its mission. Recent calls for more explicit LIS philosophy and theory situating libraries in the civic sphere (Buschman, 2003; 2007) and calls for integration of theory and practice (Crowley, 2005) should inform present and future public library research.

\(^5\) To avoid awkward repetition, I use the term ‘public library’ where I deem it an important distinction and otherwise I use the term ‘library’ to refer to the same organizational unit.

\(^6\) This academic discipline will be referenced by its acronym (LIS) throughout this study to indicate both the practice and research perspectives of the same subject.
agendas. As a result of this specific scarcity, I found myself ‘constructing’ my own subjectivist (and always provisional) public library theoretical lens much as Law (2004) encourages us to build a “method assemblage,” “the process of crafting and enacting the necessary boundaries between presence, manifest absence and Otherness” (Law, 2004, p. 161) when developing our approaches to research studies.

Thus, this review is organized around my interpretation of the public library’s fundamental dimensions: the library’s identity and values, the library as a public and social space, the library as knowledge organization and finally the human dimension of the library. I review the literature describing the public library’s identity and traditions as a socially situated, knowledge-centered organization from these three distinct perspectives: the physical library as public space; the library as knowing organization with particular emphasis on the reference and information service; and the library as a human-mediated service. Within each of these areas I illustrate some of the tensions and gaps in the research and theory and I apply it directly to the subject of the public library. As is the nature of the domain of library and information studies, many other broader disciplines support its research and theory including principally but not exclusively sociology, organizational theory, human communication, epistemology and philosophy, management and economics. This research topic cuts a very broad swath across these disciplines and rather than attempt to incorporate all works with a more minor relevance to the problem outlined in Chapter One, I have deliberately incorporated only the most significant work and work that has particularly illuminated my path. I conclude with a summary of key concepts that form the basis of this review.

2.1 Public library identity and values

To study the library’s role as a knowledge-based community institution, we must first conceptualize the generic public library organization to establish common ground. In most North American communities, the public library is constituted by its unique combination of structure, organizational identity and culture, and public values enacted as in its social, informational, learning places/spaces. The library’s common ground is its unique combination of space, place, identity including values and beliefs and organizational structure – the structure in which the practice of library takes place. Regardless of whether they have used the library personally or of which public library in which community they have used, most citizens with 20th century experience residing in any North American community recognize a public library and understand its central mission and goals. So what is a public library and what are its essential identity attributes?
A widely accepted definition of organizational identity is Albert & Whetten’s (in Whetten, 2006) as “the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations …. signifying an organization’s self-determined (and “self”-defining) unique social space and reflected in its unique pattern of binding commitments.” (p.220). The critical properties of identity are “central” and “enduring” and “distinguishing” (CED) and identity answers the “ideational” question, “Who are we as an organization?” (p.220) Whetten goes further to define the concept with a series of attributes and validity standards against which we can check our understanding in a particular setting (p.222).

Organizational identity is often confused with organizational culture and while they are related, they are different organizational concepts. The tendency is to explain an organization’s identity attributes as qualities of its culture instead - identity and culture are more likely to be used interchangeably. However, cultural characteristics of an organization are distinct from identity when they are not used for purposes of invoking its CED properties (or identity attributes). For example, we would not say that a public library has a culture of sharing materials; rather, we would say that making its collections available for community use, is a key functional attribute of what a public library is, answering in part the ideational identity question. This distinction between identity and culture becomes important when I discuss how a public library as organization might change or adapt to the latest information and communication technologies and the citizenry’s participation in the emerging knowledge society.

North American public library history is rich with documentary evidence, narratives, buildings and artefacts that illustrate its central, enduring and distinguishing identity properties. Further, public libraries are often defined and described by these historically established physical properties – collections (primarily print), buildings, and librarians and only recently are these organizations establishing their related identity in the virtual domain. One of the ongoing challenges for public libraries is to adapt this traditional identity to the modern 21st century technology-enabled society.

The “central” and “enduring” conceptual claims defining the structure of an organization’s identity are articulated through its organizational values or core beliefs (Whetten, 2006, p.222). The public library’s identity is constituted in large part by the values it maintains and exhibits. A value is defined (by Rokeach in Gorman, 2000) as

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7 According to Whetten (2006), the other conceptual domain claim distinguishes an organization’s functional identity and is stated as “attributes used by an organization to positively distinguish itself from others” (p. 222). For example, we would know a library by how it is different from a bookstore, or different from the Internet.
an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.

Derived from this definition are several dimensions of note (Gorman, 2000): 1) values are equated with beliefs; 2) a value is also a preference – in effect, embracing one value is implicitly rejecting others; 3) values are enduring – although not entirely immutable, values evolve and are sustained over long periods of time; and finally 4) in this definition, values refer to both means and ends. This last characteristic is especially important in the context of this discussion about the future of public libraries. When examined as end states as well as means for public libraries and their communities, these values offer guidance to librarians in planning and delivering library services, in a 21st century of technological domination.

These values are implied in many current and historical discussions about libraries and librarianship (Alfino & Pierce, 1997; Birdsall, 1995; Durrance, 2001; Greenhalgh et al, 1995; McCabe, 2001; Muddiman & Black, 1993; Redmond & Dain, 1999). When faced with uncertainty and change, it is appropriate to revisit these professional and institutional library values that inform our core business, in the context of planning library services in the 21st century.

Borne out of the library’s historical and philosophical origins in 19th century thought - idealism and rationalism – library values of stewardship, rationalism, intellectual freedom, equity of access, service, privacy, democracy, literacy and learning, define this ideational notion of the library we see in our communities still today. Birdsall (1995) illustrates these philosophical origins through the modern public library’s early physical iconography. The small town library “reflects a deep-seated social need for objective symbols of community; and thus, in this respect the library is a profoundly conservative institution” whereas, the more urban library is “a testament to urban individualism and liberal rationality…. an urban window to the cosmopolitan world, a source of new ideas free from local restraint, a vehicle for individualism and self-development.” The public library continues to link its philosophical legacy of conservatism and liberalism, of utilitarian individualism and social idealism. As Gorman (2000) cautions, however, dramatic changes in technology are affecting more than just libraries; we are all in “a world of constant change … [experiencing an] inexplicable, omnipresent, queasy sense of ground shifting beneath our feet.”

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8 See Appendix 1 for a summary of the values and their central characteristics, adapted from Gorman, 2000.
These library values as beliefs, particularly the values of learning, democracy, intellectual freedom and equity of access, as they are presented within their historical traditions by Gorman (2000) and similarly implied by Birdsall (1995) a few years earlier continue to underpin the public library’s belief system as a knowing and learning organization.

2.2 Public library as public (civic) place

Perhaps more than any other of its dimensions, public libraries occupy a pre-eminent place in our North American psyches as safe, community buildings, as accessible places of learning in our neighbourhoods, as architectural (literally and metaphorically) pillars of our communities (Davies, 1974). Library buildings have an architectural tradition that is rich and replete with symbolism (Mattern, 2007). Embedded in libraries as places and spaces is a complex network of meanings, actors, practices, and properties. Again, the evolution of the Internet, the web and now web 2.0, and a wealth of information and communications technologies, precipitate a re-examination of what constitutes a library space or place.

In their edited volume on *The Library as Place*, Buschman & Leckie (2007, pp.3-25) introduce and synthesize for the first time, various theories of library as space and place from a geographic or spatial perspective with particular emphasis on Habermas’ public sphere as the most meaningful post-modern interpretation. A common, historical distinction between space (as location) and place (as occupation of that location) has been superseded by a more complex notion of place that combines both aspects. A number of other academic disciplines have also incorporated ideas of space and place into their work and their work has also influenced the geographic thinking. Of note in this category are Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of *habitus* and Anthony Giddens and the spaces of social reproduction and change. Both of these contributions have a bearing on public libraries and will be discussed later in this study.

As an introduction to this discussion, libraries are classified along two dimensions of place and space by Robert Sack (in Buschman & Leckie, pp. 9-10) as “primary” places where forces of nature, social relations and meaning interact. Contributors to this volume then recognize the diverse range of historical and contemporary practices library places enact within their structural and physical spaces. The following thematic discussion of the library as public space and public place is informed by this collection. I retain a limited distinction between the two terms to distinguish separate roles public libraries have
historically realized. Three perspectives of the library’s role as public place are discussed: a political-economic perspective theorized by Habermas and the public sphere and a social practice perspective (Budd, 2001) and illustrated by the discussion on libraries as public buildings and as community-based, relational spaces.

2.2.1 Public libraries as public sphere

Habermas’ work on the public sphere is slowly entering library literature as an important aspect of the library’s past and an indication of the direction it should take in the future (Buschman, 2003; Muddiman & Black, 1993; Budd, 2001; McCook, 2004; Webster, 1995; Williamson, 2000). The public sphere is defined as:

an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) and also enjoying autonomy from partisan economic forces, which is dedicated to rational debate (i.e., to debate and discussion which is not ‘interested’, ‘disguised’ or ‘manipulated’) and which is both accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry (Webster, 1995, pp. 101-102).

Webster (1995) describes the unique role of public libraries from a Habermasian perspective:

….the public service ethos, conceived as an outlook which, in the informational realm at least, was committed to dispassionate and neutral presentation of information and knowledge to the widest possible public, irrespective of people’s abilities to pay, can be regarded as closely consonant with an orientation essential to the effective functioning of the public sphere (p. 104).

Habermas’ public sphere embodies political, economic and most importantly, cultural influences: it is a sphere or place where the ideals of democracy, public conversation and debate can be tested and contested by individuals as citizens without risk of institutional censure or exclusion. It is a political field where power is negotiated through economic and social exchange.

Williamson (2000) points out the growing tension in public libraries that are being encouraged to adopt a private sector, market-driven orientation to services and funding. Although his context is specifically the UK, the concern is that “the Public library is seen as a threat to the newly-powerful capitalist ‘elite’ who see the democratization which the Public library offers as being in direct conflict with the ‘faked version’ of the ‘public sphere’” (Williamson, 2000, p. 182). Habermas’ “faked version” is a public sphere created by publicists and, marketers who are promoting a particular spin or view of the public domain. A similar tension has been documented about North American library communities (Birdsall, 1995; Buschman, 2003; Buschman & Leckie, 2007; Kranich, 2001; McCabe, 2001; McCook, 2000). Furthermore, public libraries have also become a common site of community debate
around the public’s right to a Habermasian space for individual expressions of intellectual freedom particularly in the newer, Internet-dominated information marketplace (Buschman & Leckie, 2007). These tensions can also be read as the latest testament to the library’s role in the democratic public sphere.

That public libraries represent civic notions of democracy and intellectual freedom is often implicitly noted by experienced library clients, and library staff members alike. Moreover, the historical impetus that created public libraries in England and later North America was a direct response to citizens’ request for a public library to become their centre for lifelong learning (Buschman, 2007; Hardy, 1912). Since it was first proclaimed by writer, Charles Dickens, on the occasion of the opening of Britain’s first free public library, this call for public libraries, continues to be repeated in similar modern manifesto-like language:

> It is this great free school inviting the humblest workman to come in and be its student; this great free school, most munificently endowed by voluntary subscription in an incredibly short space of time – starting upon its glorious career with 20,000 volumes of books – knowing no sect, no party, no distinction – knowing but the public want and the public good. (Hardy, 1912, p. 19)

Buschman (2007) calls on the LIS research community for a more rigorous theoretical examination of the public library’s political roots in democracy and public education, particularly in this age of technological surveillance, control and marketization of our public institutions.

### 2.2.2 Public libraries as spaces of public practice

Public libraries are not only public spheres or intellectual spaces where the ideologies of democracy and intellectual freedom are made accessible to all citizens equally. Libraries are also very real, physical, public spaces that provide unique opportunities for citizens or community members to enter and spend time in, either individually or collectively for purposes that are very broadly defined and which include accessing collections that are recreational and informational in a variety of formats either independently or with the assistance of reference librarians as mediators. Library buildings are spaces where people engage in the practice of library.

Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* which has qualities of space-ness and place-ness where individuals engage with organizations, may be helpful in understanding the 21st century public library as both structure and practice. Habitus is defined as a “system of durable, transposable, dispositions, structured structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations. Habitus is thus a sense of one’s (and others) place and role in the world of one’s lived environment” (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005, p.21). Habitus is
the product of history and is negotiated in “fields” or structured social spaces, in relationship to culture, structure and power. The motivation for Bourdieu in developing this idea was to help us understand how what we do, individually and collectively, and the structures (i.e., institutions in this context) in which we conduct ourselves, constitute each other. From this point of view, then, libraries are public (physical) buildings and institutional structures where citizens individually create their sense of library practice and where the structure of the library is itself created by these citizens and their dispositions or ongoing interactions with the collections (the objects) and the spaces. Habitus is negotiated in fields where culture and power become structuring structures. Habitus is dispositional or bodily and in this way, resists cognitive knowing. Public libraries are unique civic and social spaces because we interact with them and because they (their buildings, collections, services) interact with each of us as citizen-learners (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005).

Library as habitus co-constitutes the doctrine of the public sphere realized in the regular construction of new libraries and the increased use of public library buildings as public spaces (Ang, Das et al, 2001; Leckie & Hopkins, 2002; Mattern, 2007; McCook, 2004). The increasing influence of the “encroaching” of private market interests, discussed in many contexts throughout recent public library research, is also supported in studies of the use of public library space (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). In their observational study, Given & Leckie (2003) identify three primary uses of library spaces in two Canadian central libraries as reading, writing and talking. Talking to other patrons represents between 12 and 20% of the most commonly observed behaviour. This finding supports the “library as an interactive place” versus the “library as [only] quiet space” (p. 382).

A series of studies from the University of Sheffield on the effect of library closures and the reductions in library hours on their communities (Bryson, Usherwood & Proctor, 2003; Proctor, Lee & Reilly, 1998; Proctor & Simmons, 2000) supports the citizenry’s expectations to have access to their public library as their own, physical community space: “the building-based local library was shown to have a value which is distinctive and irreplaceable by any alternative form of provision” (p. 108). Clearly there is a continuing and significant role for the library building as public space.

2.2.3. Public libraries as community place

Community is the space where civic librarianship takes place. Buschman and Leckie (2007) differentiate the notions of community and of place asserting that the concept of community
is too broad to be used synonymously with place. They acknowledge, however, the very strong link between the two notions:

Nonetheless, the ideas that a community can form around a place, can create a place and/or have strong ties to place are notions that fit very well with this discussion of libraries …. Libraries as space/place and notions of community, therefore go hand in hand. (p. 13).

The following perspectives on the concept of community help us understand this relationship.

A sociological perspective illustrates how the idea of community can inform the public library’s place-based significance:

a community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face to face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a ‘we-ness’ in a community; one is a member. (Bender & Kruger, 1982, p.10)

Library space in this way provides both the context for community members to act in, and it is also an agent itself in constituting community. As places that create meaning and “truth” where social practices occur, libraries as places are constitutive of community – inside the buildings, the collection areas, reading areas and program spaces together enable and constrain human actions and our awareness. Embedded in just their physical properties and enacted through the library’s community of members who negotiate themselves in these spaces, residues of past meanings and potential for future meanings are present (Buschman & Leckie, 2007, p.10).

Sarason’s (1974) psychological sense of community is described as “the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully part of a larger collectivity” (p.1). The library as place gives us access to that collectivity which shares library practices. From a communitarian perspective, Etzioni (1996) defines community in terms of its key characteristics – a web of affect-laden relationships, commitment to shared values, norms and meanings – along with a shared history and identity and a relatively high level of responsiveness to both members and the world (p 5). Etzioni (1996) acknowledges the link between definitions of community and of culture. While this perspective on community is similar to the previous disciplinary definitions, critics of Etzioni see the communitarian perspective as overly restrictive or narrow and associated with a morally entrenched, political authoritarianism (Bauman, 2001).

Although public libraries traditionally define their communities geographically, they also conceptualize their communities on other levels. Because a public library is mandated to serve all citizens in a given municipal jurisdiction, and because North American cities are often described as a “community of communities” (Etzioni, 1996, p. 10), libraries have
difficulty bounding and defining the communities they serve and inhabit. Black (1997) and McCook (2000; 2004) renew the call among professionals to more actively participate in community building activities. While Black (1997) links community librarianship to the goal of social inclusion, McCook (2000) presents a community building framework to address the library’s broader goal of civic renewal, where libraries are partners in a larger civic agenda. Library communities are also defined by the characteristics of their many user groups (Chatman, 1996; Curry & Curtis 2000; Durrance & Fisher, 2005; Pettigrew, 1999; Ross, 1999; Rothbauer, 2007) whether it is by age, language, gender, culture, or reading preference.

The relationship between library communities and library places is long-standing. However, the increasing pervasiveness of information and communications technology is challenging libraries to reassess their library places and spaces and to reconnect with their communities (Benton Foundation, 1996; Birdsall, 1995; Gorman, 2000; Greenhalgh et al, 1995; McCabe, 2001). New models of a “library of the future” that address these changes brought on by technology and an emphasis on the library client as customer are being developed.9 The link between the library as place and its social interactions and meanings that are constituted by its members individually and collectively remains strong and is also demonstrated by the regular opening of library buildings in major urban centres such as Seattle Public Library, for example, and their community responses to these new library places of meaning and truth (Fisher, Saxton, Edwards & Mai, 2007; Mattern, 2007).

2.3 Public library as knowing organization

There are two philosophical perspectives that dominate the areas of knowledge and information management research and practice in organizations: 1) objectivism, as interpreted through market economics, and 2) subjectivism, as interpreted through the study of social practices (Giddens, 1984; Huizing, 2007a; 2007b). It is important to recognize the language and understand the rationales behind these perspectives because they contribute to our understanding of knowledge, knowing and organizational behaviour. Once we can identify these perspectives, we can also identify inherent biases or potential blind spots and

9 Three urban public libraries have created and branded experiments in library planning and have achieved international recognition for their work. Their service models are designed around new buildings, using the ‘customer experience’ and the ‘knowledge and learning society’ as their architectural and functional planning core concepts: 1) the Idea Store in Tower Hamlets (UK) - http://www.ideastore.co.uk/index; 2) the Richmond Public Library’s (Canada) ‘Ironwood library of the future’- http://www.yourlibrary.ca/aboutus_sub.cfm?lev1=5 and 3) the ‘Experience library’ in Cerrito,California http://www.ci.cerritos.ca.us/library/experience_library.html
By far the dominant view of how to manage knowledge in organizations comes from the market-based orientation of the economists and management theorists that sees knowledge as an asset, often leveraged through information technology, to be captured, stored, and exchanged for a price. The “knowledge-based view of the firm” (Grant, 1996) is a widely used term for this view and it continues to be a source for new theory and new interpretations for market oriented organizations. As noted in Chapter One, public libraries, like other public sector organizations are being pressured through their municipal politicians to formally adopt this market orientation as evidenced by their approaches to planning, implementation and evaluation of services. Although adopting the market-model need not preclude use of the other more practice-centered approach to services, library boards and their municipal governments clearly prefer this objectivist orientation. At the organizational level, the clearest signs of this preference are evident in the regular use of “value” and “performance” measures in library planning and performance documents (Matthews, 2007).

Briefly, the objectivist perspective is characterized as transactional, defining information and knowledge as products with objective (physical and technological) realities, communicating along a sender-receiver conduit. The transactional view accords value only in market-based terms, that is, in price or price equivalent. In contrast, the subjectivist view of knowledge and information management is based in human practice and in this case, organizational practice, and in understanding and meaning: the goal is that we make sense of our interactions in the world, using this knowing to change our meaning and our practices or actions in our worlds (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Weick, 1995). To achieve this goal, subjectivists emphasize the cognitive or human-centered communication and learning processes that enable mutual learning through sharing, rather than the de-personalized, mechanized routine of exchange (Huizing, 2007; Wenger, 1998). In a figurative way, practice is more cyclical, whereas market-based economic thinking is more linear. Despite the obvious and occasionally rhetorical duality theorists these perspectives present, we appreciate both perspectives and recognize their interdependence thus gaining the richest insights into the library’s organizational challenges and potential for innovation.

The following discussion reviews the major research and theoretical literature around knowledge and information management from the LIS perspective. The library’s epistemology is presented; the knowing organization is introduced and is followed by a review of the main concepts in organizational knowledge and information management as
they relate to the public library organization. The characteristics of three commonly bundled types of knowledge (explicit, tacit and cultural knowledge) are discussed including the three main knowledge processes or practices (communicating, learning, and sharing) public libraries engage in, which are then discussed specifically as they are relevant to the library’s reference and information practice which is arguably, most at risk in the competitive Google information and knowledge sharing marketplace.

2.3.1 Public library and social epistemology

Knowledge is the newly acknowledged currency of the 21st century and while librarians may have an intuitive understanding of how our services have built, and continue to build knowledge for our community, our constituents and politicians do not necessarily share that intuition. Knowledge and information management is widely heralded as the latest management fad or strategy to rescue bureaucracies from their perceived lethargy and attendant ineffectiveness. In exposing the public library’s philosophical and political roots, it is important to focus on the meanings behind the knowledge rhetoric.

In Knowledge and knowing in library and information science Budd (2001) delineates an LIS “genealogy of thought” – an epistemology of knowledge - that librarians can use to strengthen this link explicitly and thus, perhaps benefit from having a wider understanding of what underpins our core practices. Budd (2001; 2004) credits librarian, Jesse Shera, with the first conception of social epistemology (SE), as “the study of those processes by which society as a whole seeks to achieve a perceptive or understanding relation to the total environment” (p.222). Social epistemology is both the sociology of knowledge and the influence of society upon knowledge.

Shera & Egan (1952) present four assumptions of SE that were first articulated through their real world lens as librarians. These assumptions bear re-stating because they give a theoretical foundation to the public library’s opportunity in a knowledge economy:

1. That it is possible for the individual to enter into a relationship of “knowing” with respect to his own immediate environment or that part of the entirety of his environment with which he has personal contact.
2. ... In short, one must assume that man can achieve an intellectual synthesis with his environment and that environment, through our present mediums [sic] of communication, includes remote and vicarious as well as immediate and direct experience.
3. That by co-ordinating the differing knowledge of many individuals, the society as a whole may transcend the knowledge of the individual.
4. That social action, reflecting integrated intellectual action, transcends individual action (pp. 132-133).

From the standpoint of “social epistemology,” the public library enters into a relationship of “knowing” with its community, based on the socially constructed knowledge
created between and among individual library clients, and built around the interactions initiated through traditional public library services such as access to past knowledge through collections, information services and programming.

In keeping with liberal democratic ideology, then, the library’s contribution at the philosophical level, begins with individual knowing, but also acknowledges a complementarity between the library’s role in community and the knowing-ness of society as a whole. Using a framework of social epistemology for grounding LIS work allows us to understand library service not as the direct transference of a knowledge object from one receptacle to another; rather, we “must think in terms of ‘knowing,’ which is in the process of becoming, in solution, … the production of knowledge as a social activity” (Budd, 2001, pp. 241-242). The public library was conceived on this basis and remains rooted in social epistemology, as its theory of knowledge.

Towards the end of his career, Shera (in Budd, 2001) became somewhat disillusioned with the profession’s emphasis on the science of information at the expense of an emphasis on the ideas contained in information. He notes that those among us who supported the “new discipline of information science” misinterpreted information and ignored the larger role of the librarian in knowledge creation: “they assumed that it [information] related to the communication of knowledge rather than the transmission of signals. Information theory … is severely limited in its communicative potential” (p. 283).

Although Budd (2004) specifically addresses the academic library’s role in social epistemology, “to make manifest and tangible the products of social processes aimed at putting us on the path to knowledge” (p.364), the same instructional role is implicit in the public library’s history of practice as well. This manifestation occurs through the processes of “veritism” (from Goldman, 1999) and “reliability.” The former refers to how social practices can contribute or not to creation of true belief and the latter refers process by which we seek local justifications for belief.

Social practice offers a tangible way of understanding social epistemology in action. Although the concept is widely used among organizational theorists and sociologists, a simple and often used definition comes from Giddens (1984) who links human agency with organizing structures in a mutually constitutive relationship of practice and meaning-making. Expanding Giddens’ notion, Schatzki (2005) defines social practice as “structured spatial-temporal manifolds of action” (pp.474-478) organized by an evolving set of four kinds of phenomena: 1) understandings of actions 2) rules 3) teleological-affective structuring and 4) general understandings. And further elaborated by Huizing (2007b), social practice is a
“structured space where individuals intersubjectively interact with the larger social enablers and constraints” (p. 98).

One dimension of social practice is discursive practice defined as the use of a sign system, for which there are norms of right and wrong use, and the signs concern or are directed at various things (Hare & Gillett, 1994, 28-9 in Tsoukas, 2005, p. 383). A crucial feature of discursive practices is that the meanings they embody are not just in the minds of the individuals involved but in the practices at hand – they are intersubjective. (Tsoukas, 2005, p.383). In terms of this study, then, social practice refers to our understanding of the reference inter-actions and discursive practice is the language of signs and symbols we use to generate intersubjective or shared meanings that manifest that practice.

More recent theories of the social or contextual aspects of information seeking and use (Dervin, 1977, 1998, 1999; Kuhlthau, 2004; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998; Taylor, 1991), emphasize the relational or communication-based flow of information seeking behaviours which are also intrinsic to our social practices. Dervin’s (1998, 1999) sense-making theory is based on the knowledge gap experienced by the information seeker across a time-space-activity continuum and on the affective or social dimensions from the seeker’s perspective; it is in Dervinian terms, a verbing process, continually in flux, with little certainty except the seeker’s answers to questions such as “what happened to bring you here?” Kuhlthau’s (2004) addition of the dimension of uncertainty in the process of seeking meaning, also reminds us that the information seeking process can be fraught with the user’s affective uncertainty. Our job as researchers is to communicate attentively, with these users about their experiences. Pendleton & Chatman’s (1999) work on small world information behaviours also emphasizes the social context, the norms, and world views which influence an individual’s information behaviour and information seeking processes. These socially situated, user-centred theories of information within LIS scholarship create a theoretical link between information behaviour of any array library users, as individuals, to the broader purpose of a community’s capacity to experience knowing.

2.3.2 Knowing organizations
Research into knowledge and information theory and practice for this study involves many disciplines. Since the early 1990’s, there have been at least two distinct generations of research and theory and a third generation of ideas can now be observed. In the broadest terms, these generations can be categorized in these ways. Earlier publications defined the knowledge-based view of the firm (KBV) from organizational, managerial and economic
perspectives. The second publishing wave incorporated ideas about how knowledge as a strategic asset should be dealt with by organizations to maximize competitive advantages; the role of technology in capturing and transmitting knowledge; and the use of knowledge for organizational learning through, for example, communities of practice. Finally, the third generation of literature about knowledge and information management deals with the subject from a practice perspective, where the 'management' dimension is being replaced by studies of the 'sociality' of knowledge and information, where learning, collective knowing and communication are emphasized.

More specifically, for this study the knowledge literature can be clustered as follows. Organizational theorists (Blackler, 1995; Boisot, 1995; Choo, 2006; Huizing 2007; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Tsoukas, 2002; Weick, 1995), write about how knowledge and information, is created, shared and used in and across organizations. Management scientists (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi; 1995; Von Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000) also focus on the pragmatic use of “working knowledge” – how knowledge at work can achieve certain outcomes, specifically competitive advantages through improved decision-making. Research from a sociological or practice-based perspective (Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Hansen, 1999; Levin, Cross & Abram, 2002; Nardi & O’Day, 1998; Nardi & Whittaker, 2000; Pipek & Ackerman, 2003; Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000; Suchman, 2005; Tindall & Wellman, 2001; Wenger, 1998) describes how individuals share knowledge through interactions in teams, clusters and networks both formally and informally. Finally, concepts such as social and community capital as articulated by Putnam (2000) and Woolcott (1998) help us understand organizational knowledge and learning in the broader public sphere, in the ecology or community where the public library exists. Many of these research perspectives on knowledge and information share the underlying assumption that organizations which thrive in the knowledge-based society are those that perceive their critical information gaps and that can then link information behaviours, organizational beliefs, shared experiences, and meanings, together into successful decisions or actions.

The study of information and knowledge management from a narrower LIS perspective also relies on this literature for much of its theory and practice. However, a small number of library management texts, either recently updated or newly published, now address the library’s place in this the knowledge economy, in their recommendations for flatter organizational structures and use of work teams or communities (Prentice, 2005; Pugh 2005; Rowley & Roberts, 2004); in their discussion of the information age and the changes brought by technology (Curran & Miller, 2005; Stueart & Moran, 2002); and in their
discussion of some new roles needed by library leaders and library staff (Pugh, 2005; Rowley & Roberts, 2004).

Since their primary purposes are to instruct new librarians in the business of managing, these texts are more prescriptive than innovative and more about managing than about envisioning services differently. Pugh (2005) is exceptional in this cluster because he focuses on un-structuring the traditional library’s organizational structures, and on “encouraging a small outbreak of anarchy in the interests of organizational health” (p. ix). Pugh’s management emphasis illustrates what un-structuring and re-structuring the 21st century organization might look like. What is needed more importantly, however, is a comprehensive framework for understanding why and how information and knowledge figure in this newly re-structured organization.

In perhaps the most comprehensive and recent critical review of the LIS management literature, Day (2002) applies bibliometric analysis to both the management and the LIS-management literatures. With the purpose of identifying the most influential works aimed at “improving professional communication and managerial practice” (Day, 2002, p. 232), he analyzes the various “discourse fashions” and describes the “contested management knowledge terrain” among LIS researchers, and including the influence of management “gurus”, theorists and management administrators outside LIS. The analysis indicates that LIS literature closely follows the management literature trends with some “temporal lags”; there are two major clusters – a “popular, guru-dominated literature” and “a more academic, technical literature” (p. 282) and in each case ideological discourse is dominant. “Market populism”, “reinventing government”, “planning literature with its obsession with control” and “radical organizational interventions” (p. 279) are all themes revealed in both domains. Of particular note in the public library’s context is a concluding observation: “what stands out in the production of management fashion discourse and its appropriations within LIS discourse is the fact that nearly all of it exhibits this ideological style” (Day, 2002, p. 284).

This bibliometric analysis also indicates that academic library administrators are one author cluster whom Day (2002) characterizes as having “a vested ideological interest in maintaining their own managerial authority and in promoting the organizational reputation and survival of the institutions that they control” (p. 283). This literature review includes their writing that appears in more popular publications. Information scientists from the scholarly communities form the other major group of published writers on LIS management. Public
library ideological discourse is conspicuously absent in this review, but I would argue that the same “market populism” and ideological rhetoric dominates these organizations.

Choo’s (2006) learning framework presented in *The knowing organization* (2nd ed.) updates his previous volume (1998) with greater emphasis on an organization’s learning and practice capabilities, and provides us with a way of structuring and discussing the public library’s current challenges and environment. It is a comprehensive framework drawing extensively from the information sciences theory by addressing an organization’s information and knowledge activities including sense making, knowledge creation and decision-making and the supporting aspects of these activities including information needs, information seeking and information use, recognizing the critical roles that situated context, uncertainty and cognitive factors play in these processes. Incorporating the work of management and information studies researchers (Boisot, 1995; Brown & Duguid, 1991, 2000; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Dervin, 1976; Kuhlthau, 2004; MacMullin & Taylor, 1984; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Taylor, 1991; Weick, 1995, 2001) among others, the knowing organization is a useful model for organizational learning in the current information-rich and knowledge-intensive environment and which is supported by continuously changing information and communication technologies.

A “knowing organization” (Choo, 2006) is defined and then characterized in these ways:

- it possesses information and knowledge so that it is well informed, mentally alert, and aware of threats and opportunities. Its actions are based upon a shared understanding of the organization’s context and aspirations, and are leveraged by the available knowledge and skills of its members....

By managing its information resources and information practices, it is able to
- Sense and respond to a changing environment, but also shape and influence changes in the environment that are advantageous;
- Extend its base of knowledge and capabilities, but also unlearn old assumptions and beliefs;
- Make decisions that are sometimes rational and sometimes creative in order to meet increasingly complex challenges. (p.4).

Historically, as noted earlier, the public library has laid claim to being a knowledge organization; however, with some exceptions it could be argued, public libraries are still struggling to meet the increasingly complex challenges of the technologically enabled information world. There is a level of self-awareness or self-knowledge, and a scale of change and of results implied in Choo’s (2006) knowing organization that is of a much higher order than one might typically have found, until recently, in a public sector organization such as the public library. As long as libraries continue to characterize their
strategies, more defensively by focusing on what has yet to be accomplished, transformative or macro-level strategic change that re-positions the libraries in the eyes of their respective funders, clients, staff, and communities at large, is still ahead.

In the field of knowledge and information use there are generally accepted definitions that must be understood before embarking on a detailed analysis of the public library as a knowledge organization. These definitions are similarly discussed in many sources (Blackler 1995; Choo 2006; Davenport & Prusak 1998; Morrow 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Wenger 1998; Wenger & McDermott et al, 2002). Knowledge is often defined as “justified true belief” and as “actionable information-in-context” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995); these definitions can be contrasted with more traditional characterizations of information as more static and fixed or stable. Whereas the economists’ perspective characterizes knowledge as an asset, an object to be acquired, organized, accessed, exchanged, used and re-used, from the subjectivists’ perspective, knowledge should only be defined as a verb, as knowing because there is no knowledge outside of its practice which is in fact, knowing (Huizing, 2007b). For the moment, I accept all of these meanings unless otherwise qualified. Knowledge can be further defined as explicit, tacit or cultural; and each type of knowledge has a specific meaning in the context of the knowing organization. While these knowledge concepts can be represented very differently in different organizations, their conceptual properties remain the same and are discussed in detail, further in this section.

Although this knowledge framework has learning as its goal, according to the organization’s ability to “sense and respond to its environment,” to “extend itself” “to [learn] and unlearn” and to make both rational and creative decisions, the path forward is still not completely clear. When is an organization not a knowing organization? Why is it not? How does an organization sustain its knowing-ness? Are there differing interpretations of a knowing organization depending on the larger economic and cultural environments in which the organization exists? Although the library is in the business of collecting and providing access to knowledge, is it or can it be a knowing organization? These questions can be explored through the lens of the generic urban public library and one of its core practices – provision of reference and information services.

I will un-bundle the main concepts of this framework as noted earlier into three categories of knowledge – explicit, tacit, and cultural – and I link these types of knowledge and their related activities in which this knowledge and knowing is enacted – communicating, learning and sharing - as they relate to the public library generally and to the reference and information practice, particularly. It is important to note that debates
continue about whether or not knowledge should in fact be unbundled in these ways (Huizing, 2007a; Spender & Scherer, 2007). Although some of these questions challenge Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) knowledge conversion process as being highly problematic (SECI), for the purposes of structuring a review, I maintain the distinctions and define the concepts in their narrower sense for the public library context. Later chapters of this thesis reporting study findings and discussion, address this definitional question again.

2.3.3 Explicit knowledge

Explicit or codified knowledge “refers to knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, 59). Explicit knowledge is “knowledge that is expressed formally using a system of symbols, and can therefore be easily communicated or diffused. Explicit knowledge may be object-based or rule-based. Object-based knowledge may be found in artefacts such as products, patents, software code, computer databases …. Explicit knowledge is rule-based when the knowledge is codified into rules, routines or operating procedures. A substantial part of an organisation’s operational knowledge is contained in its rules, routines and procedures” (Choo, 2000, p.39).

In the public library, two primary examples of explicit knowledge are the collections themselves, electronic databases, the public Internet access terminals and the automated library catalogue, the access aid to these collections. Other examples of explicit knowledge in the public library include the structure of knowledge in the organization, the external promotional publications such as pathfinders, booklists and program guides; internally, explicit knowledge is captured primarily in the policies and procedures manuals and in the planning documents and reports guiding the delivery of services.

Explicit knowledge collected, organized, preserved and made available in these containers or information objects is both knowledge and information combined. The most important distinction to be made about explicit knowledge is that it is object-centered, that it is most easily seen and therefore most easily counted, and that in library terms, it often serves as the price substitute for valuation purposes. Libraries services are valued in many different ways (Matthews, 2004) and valuation schemes are changing to reflect other measures, but total counts of inputs and outputs (e.g., items added to collection or number of reference staff and items borrowed and number of reference questions answered) has been one of the most common methods throughout recent public library history (Public library statistics, 2006). Another relevant aspect of explicit knowledge is that it is not uncommon for ICT to become anthropomorphized within knowledge intensive organizations.
and libraries are no exception to this trend. Library catalogues used to be accessible via ‘dumb terminals’ but are now more often being characterized as subjects with names and intelligence, housed still in the body of a computer.10

2.3.4 Tacit knowledge
There has been much discussion in the knowledge and information management literature regarding what tacit knowledge is and where it exists in organizations (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Blair, 2002; Day, 2005; Tsoukas, 2005). Michael Polanyi introduced the term in his book, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966). Whereas explicit knowledge is clearly object-centered, tacit knowledge has a much more subjectivist orientation. Tacit knowledge is personal knowing informed by our judgement (Tsoukas, 2005) because it is located in “personal knowledge used by members to perform their work and to make sense of their worlds. It is learned through extended periods of experiencing and doing a task during which the individual develops a feel for, and a capacity to make intuitive judgements about, the successful execution of the activity” (Choo, 2006, p.135).

Tacit knowing and tacit knowledge are enacted in the human-centered mediating processes or practices; unlike explicit knowledge, evidence of tacit knowledge is rarely present in the Google information world. This type of knowledge may occasionally appear to be simply a communication exchange or flow between two people; however it is in the collaborative evocation of shared meaning(s) or understanding(s) that we can differentiate tacit knowledge from communication. Tacit knowledge has several properties that make it difficult to contain: it is vectorial in that we know the particulars of something by relying on our awareness of them for attending to something else and it is phenomenal in the sense that we transform our subsidiary experience into a new sensory experience. Polanyi describes our acquisition of tacit knowing as a process of “indwelling” whereby we interiorize our learning and experiences and in so doing they become less focal and more instrumental (in Tsoukas, 2005, p. 149). Tacit knowledge is really only tacit *knowing*, it can only be displayed – manifested – in what we do, never captured and finally “new knowledge comes about not when the tacit becomes explicit but when our skilled performance – our praxis – is punctuated in new ways through social interactions” (Tsoukas, 2005, p.159).

Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) credit Japanese companies with the early recognition of just how important tacit knowledge is to their businesses’ successes. They describe two

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10 As suggested by the information page on the library’s catalogue at Toronto Public Library, for example, the catalogue “permits” “allows” or “enables” users to access resources. [http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/abo_uep_index.jsp](http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/abo_uep_index.jsp)
dimensions to tacit knowledge: the technical dimension “which encompasses the kind of informal and hard-to-pin down skills or crafts captured in the term, ‘know-how,’” and the “cognitive dimension [that] consists of schemata, mental models, beliefs and perceptions so ingrained that we take them for granted” (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, p.8). Tacit knowledge is built on our values and our life experiences; an essential aspect of tacit knowledge within organizations is that tacit knowledge is very difficult to communicate via traditional corporate methods (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998). As an experiential and highly contextualized form, tacit knowledge is a social process but never an object or asset as we characterize explicit knowledge. Tacit knowing is classically, only knowing through doing and is an utterly human phenomenon in this way. The distinction can be clearly stated: “technologies do not construct meaning; they distribute data that patiently awaits human sense making, no more, no less (Huizing, 2007b, p.102).

2.3.5 Cultural knowledge
The essential characteristics of cultural knowledge are that it is shared knowledge, usually taken for granted, based on shared history, and that it consists of shared beliefs and values about the organization, it is important not to lose sight of differences among an organization’s sub-cultures (Choo, 2006). From the perspective of the public library, the mission statement and core values constitute the shared vision, while the goals and objectives of the organization constitute the criteria and expectations on which the organization’s performance is evaluated and finally valued. Cultural knowledge exists in the library leadership’s patterns of behaviour, in the library’s approaches to learning and unlearning, in its communications processes, in how it values knowledge in its day-to-day business and, in the case of the library, even in its stereotypes. Cultural differentiation and even fragmentation can occur at the departmental, branch or even individual level.

2.3.6 Knowledge and knowing at the reference desk
Where does knowledge exist in public libraries? How is it expressed and how might it strengthen provision of information services? In their ethnographic study, Nardi & O’Day (1998; 1999) studied librarians at a special library in terms of their ability to act as “human intelligent agents.” Through the course of their observations and interviews with the librarians and clients, they came to understand the complexity of the information provision process; they contrast the human process with that of “intelligent software agents, or indeed any computer program” (p. 81). Librarians perform a number of functions that computer software cannot and in the process of repeatedly performing these specialized human
functions, is the essence of a very important aspect of a library’s tacit knowledge (1998, p. 335)

Nardi & O’Day (1998) observe that reference librarians speak, understand and engage in negotiations with their clients to refine and sharpen their understanding of the information need. In addition to accessing the library’s codified explicit knowledge, librarians read and understand content, make connections across diverse sources, assess the quality of information sources, and offer the human touch. Throughout their descriptions of these tasks, the authors use language that resonates with Nonaka & Takeuchi’s (1995) description of tacit knowledge creation as follows (emphasis added):

- A reference librarian enables the enactment of the client’s search activity even when the client is stalled or confused. Information needs are often met only by virtue of a librarian’s skilled use of language and sympathetic understanding of people… (p. 336)
- Librarians provide relevant material that requires a judgement based on the goals and state of the client’s current activity, the quality of the material itself and knowledge of the overall quality of the source of the material… (p. 337)
- It was unclear how the librarians mentally catalogued what they were reading to recall it later for clients. But it was clear that this approach was used repeatedly. When presented with a client’s need, the librarians could sometimes perform blindingly fast searches by remembering what they had recently read…
- In another case, a librarian guessed the person (outside the company) who might be working on a patent relevant to an Apple client’s needs (Nardi & O’Day, 1998, p. 338)

What these researchers have not addressed is how the individual and collective work of reference librarians in action with their clients, contributes to the development of the library’s or the community’s knowledge practices.

The provision of information and reference services is a core function and may also be a service defined legislatively in many public library communities (McCook, 2004). Most public libraries in North America adopt a definition of a standard reference transaction for purposes of annual reporting.11 In their how-to-do-it manual for librarians, Ross, Nilsen & Dewdney (2002) integrate communication and information seeking theory including the sensemaking work of Dervin (1998) with the most important reference research studies into a practical teaching tool on the reference interview. They define the reference interview as:

11 “Reference transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies or policy statements. Reference work includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools and services. Creation and management of information resources includes the development and maintenance of research collections, research guides, catalogs, databases, web sites, search engines, etc., that patrons can use independently, in-house or remotely, to satisfy their information needs. Assessment activities include the measurement and evaluation of reference work, resources and services.” (Reference and User Services Association, 2008, http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/protools/referenceguide/definitionsreference.cfm
a purposive conversation between the librarian and the user in which the librarian asks one or more questions in order 1) to get a clearer and more complete picture of what the user wants to know and 2) to link the user to the system (p. 4).

The reference interview is distinguished from other types of conversation in several ways: it is highly desirable for the interviewer to do more listening than talking; interviews involve the asking and answering of questions; interviews are directed toward a purpose; redundancy and repetition are encouraged; multiple means of reflecting content are used by the interviewer to ensure the interviewee has been accurately heard and reference interviews are highly structured (Ross et al, 2002, pp. 2-3). Librarians are instructed to ignore these other types of conversations that might also take place in a reference interview in order to focus attention on assisting the client in filling their information gap.

Where knowledge sharing differs from a typical reference interview is that the latter is officially structured as a one-directional, purposive conversation in a five stage process (p.3) that may be iterative, or occurring in loops throughout an interview. Reference interviews are typically conducted by trained librarians or paraprofessionals and so the conversation as it has been conceptually discussed is less collaborative or mutual than in knowledge creation, sharing and use processes. Reference interviews are formally differentiated from other types of staff-client conversations that may take place at the desk because they are interviews that respond to reference questions posed at the desk. Reader’s advisory service is “the quest to put the right book in the hands of the right reader” (Cassell & Hiremath, 2000, p.6) and the librarian engaged in a reader’s advisory interview is “skilled at asking users questions that enable them to assess users’ reading level, language or educational background” (p. 6). Reference questions in this study context are understood to include this related type of question, the reader’s advisory question, which is also formally recognized in official government classifications of questions. Questions that are not formally recognized as reference questions, such as “directional” or “technology” questions, are excluded in the narrow interpretation according to government prescribed guidelines defining the service. However in the larger context of the social practice of the reference service as a knowledge place and space in the library, all interactions are recognized and included in the analysis.

In this study, each staff-client communication interaction that is initiated by either person, and which concludes through mutual agreement, is described as a reference interaction or encounter because it occurs at the reference service desk, a formal boundary point designated by the organization as the place to ask “information questions.” In most instances these interactions consist of questions asked and answered, but these questions and answers may not more narrowly be responding to an information query “in which library
staff recommend, interpret, evaluate and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs” (RUSA, 2008). Thus reference interactions and encounters are broader types of conversations; reference transactions are the specific information questions posed and which meet the definition for and are counted as “official” questions answered. This study addresses all of the types of face-to-face conversations that take place at this service point, the “reference” or “information” “desk” because it is a study focusing on knowledge and knowledge processes which occur at these organizational boundaries. These conversations are named as “reference interactions” and “reference encounters” using the word “reference” to refer to the location at which they take place in the library and thus also to distinguish them from reference questions that could be asked at circulation desks. Were this study focused on knowledge and knowledge sharing of only “reference transactions” (RUSA, 2008), these other conversations (e.g. directional or technology questions) would be excluded.

Like tacit knowledge which is technically informed by mental models that are often taken for granted (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), reference interviews are also shaped by both the librarian’s and the client’s mental models (Dewdney & Michell, 1996). Michell & Dewdney (1998) employ the theory of mental models (MMs) associated with Norman and Johnson-Laird who describe a mental model as a “working model that individuals construct in their minds to facilitate interaction with the environment, other individuals, or technology” (in Ross et al, p.25). Such a mental model contrasts with the conceptual model of the same object in that a mental model is by definition, inaccurate and incomplete MMs provide some of the individual cognitive mapping that then enables us to find common ground and shared understandings in these kinds of information contexts.

Although MMs have been explored more as socio-cognitive models in reference studies, Westbrook (2006) uses the concept to explore graduate students’ ideas of an academic library information system and in this way MMs imply a more structured, rational, object-oriented utility. She acknowledges this potential weakness: “the primary difficulty in using mental model theory to support information system design lies in the mystery of the individual mind” (p. 567) and uses Dervin’s sensemaking methodology to elicit the more fluid temporal-spatial cognitive moments. Ideally, both the technical and the more socio-cognitive or “human mind” dimensions of MMs can be elicited in studies using a variety of data gathering techniques and a wide interpretative framework, which is where Westbrook’s (2006) study is most useful.
The information system to which users are referred is usually an objective, explicit knowledge base, information, “which describes the innate structure or pattern of reality, data” (Dervin, 1977, p.18). Users, by contrast, often come to the encounter with their subjective information, known as information, “ideas, the structures or pictures imputed to reality by people.” We can also recognize Dervin’s information as tacit knowledge. The reference task is for users and librarians to bridge their own knowledge gaps by objectifying the problem sufficiently so that it can be resolved by the library’s explicit knowledge systems and herein lays a significant communication challenge. These gaps in their understanding are also always contextualized by both the client and the librarian’s moments in time-space.

As demonstrated by examples from their own reference research, Ross et al (2002) suggest that clients ask questions or seek information to fill gaps in their knowledge and to enable them to then “do something” (Ross et al, 2002, p.31; Taylor, 1968). The reference interview is an exercise in contextualizing the knowledge gap and therefore is a sensemaking exercise from both Weickian and Dervinian perspectives (Choo, 2006).

Radford (1999) notes the recurrent themes of information transfer and interpersonal factors in the reference process. As an introduction to her study, she conducts an extensive review of the literature on the interpersonal or human dimensions of reference services. Her study is theoretically based on pragmatic human communication using the academic reference encounter as her object of study. Unlike more common symmetrical conversations between individuals, Radford characterizes the reference process as a complementary communication relationship because of inherent differences in power, control and status between user and reference librarian (p. 28). Radford’s study also emphasizes the importance users place on the relational aspects of the reference encounter as opposed to the accuracy or efficiency of the transaction and in this way builds, indirectly, on Durrance’s (1989) study which established willingness to return as more important than accuracy, when evaluating reference services. Radford finds that whereas users value attitude and personal qualities of the librarian, librarians more often evaluate the reference encounter from content dimensions, and to a lesser degree, value relationship qualities such as honesty, self-disclosure and attraction in the process (p.104).

The reference interview process is grounded in similar concepts as knowledge creation and sharing within organizations’ knowledge and information management processes. Critical differences between the two knowledge practices are the degree of structure around the flow or process, the purposive nature of the reference process, and the degree of mutuality or collaboration between the individuals engaged in the conversation.
But what of those other conversations that are known to take place between librarians and clients at the reference desk? If they are without purpose and without a time-space gap, are they also without meaning or importance to the library client or to the librarian?

Research on the application of knowledge and information management to the reference or information services in a library is in a preliminary or exploratory state (Rowley, 2003). More research and theory has been developed on the role of knowledge management in organizations with special libraries (Broadbent, 1998; Brown & Duguid, 2000; Choo, 2006; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Henczel, 2004; Lesser, 2000; Nardi & O’Day, 1999; Srikantaiah & Koenig, 2000) and the role of the information professional in developing organizational tools for knowledge and information management such as the enterprise portal or intranet. Such research has tended to emphasize the role of information technology in the knowledge sharing processes rather than in the human, face-to-face interactions.

2.4 The human dimension of libraries

2.4.1 Reference desk as social-relational space

An essential aspect of a knowing organization is that there is an ecological, socially constructed space where knowing is created and where informed decision-making occurs. Within the knowledge sharing and use processes, Nonaka & Konno (1998) label this place “ba”; it is also resonant of Boisot’s I-Space (1995) and Bourdieu’s “habitus” (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005; Lincoln, 2002). In this sense, place is more than a location; it is all of the conversations and gaps between tacit, and explicit knowledge, between individuals, networks, organizations and communities and while it has an aspect of limits or boundaries, it also transcends cultural or organizational boundaries when necessary to create or use knowledge. Just as tacit knowing is more of a practice than an object, so too is the knowledge space constantly being defined and evolving; it is a space constantly in a state of enactment. This relational space combines, practice, communication and learning into individual enactments or events.

More and more sophisticated information and communication technologies are also enabling relational spaces in the virtual domain. And while virtual library reference service is not the subject of this study, research comparing face-to-face interactions with electronic communication is relevant. Are there differences in the nature of the information or knowledge interaction, if it is text-based or conversationally based in person? Many of the
current reference and information behaviour theories either tacitly or explicitly refer to communication processes that underlie our information seeking and use (Fisher, Erdelez & McKechnie, 2005), whether that is captured, for example, through Goffman’s interactions of individuals in social life (Goffman, 1982) or through bridging Dervin’s sensemaking gap. Also building on Radford’s study (1999), Ford (2003) notes the importance of interpersonal communication to the reference process. In her study comparing computer-mediated with face-to-face reference service in an academic library, she found little difference in the user preference of the interaction. However, in the face-to-face interactions, there was more than twice as much time given to instruction by the librarian.

In her study of virtual networks and building on Clarke’s (1992) notion of common ground, Nardi (2005) identifies the periodic requirement for virtual co-workers to experience face-to-face “field[s] of connection”, a “labile multidimensional space comprised of feelings of affinity, commitment and attention” (p. 92). Affinity is defined as “feelings of connection between people.... achieved through activities of social bonding in which people come to feel connected with one another, readying them for further communication” (p. 99). Activities that promote social bonding include: 1) touch 2) eating and drinking 3) sharing experience in a common space and 4) informal conversation (Nardi, 2005, p. 99). Commitment is “an engagement denoting scope for ongoing communication for projects of mutual interest .... the expression of commitment is not about actually doing the work or engaging in the mutual project; it is simply about being there” (p. 112). Attention capture involves “locating the intended recipient ... and either attaining attention through eye contact in a face to face setting and/or sometimes negotiating availability through a verbal exchange for further conversation” (p. 117).

These communicative aspects of intersubjectivity are almost exclusively related to our ongoing human affective needs for connections, regardless of our shared knowledge of a domain or our shared history in performing a task or a strong network tie. Such connections are regularly required as a way of promoting readiness for effective communication and information exchange. Information and knowledge sharing in learning organizations can often be such a primary focus or objective that then de-emphasizes the communication processes that enable sharing. Communicating is not necessarily connecting. But connecting in these ways ultimately strengthens communication and by extension strengthens the quality of the information exchange.

From an organization’s sensemaking perspective, the process of enactment is the organization’s process of contextualizing meaning or creating a space and enacting the
meaning that is created, shared or reflected upon (Weick, 1995). Within organizations, sensemaking captures the raw material necessary for tacit and cultural knowledge production:

[it] consists of nothing more than talk, symbols, promises, lies, interest, attention, threats, agreements, expectations, memories, rumors, indicators, supporters, detractors, faith suspicion, trust, appearance loyalties and commitments …. Agreement on a label that sticks is as constant a connection as is likely to be found in organizations (1995, p. 128).

While the reference transaction has been narrowly characterized as channelled communication – involving an information seeker presenting their query and a librarian mediating access to the objects of information to answer the query – the reference process as meaningful practice actually requires us to engage in intersubjectivity, to find common ground with our patrons and our colleagues, and to make our mental models of information experiences, more explicit. For organizational theorists, Taylor & Van Every (2000), communication is intrinsic to organizational knowledge practice in two ways:

[We] see knowledge as transcribed in language and passed on to others through speech. This is the matter that is transacted in conversational exchanges…. But conversation serves a different role as well: in its collective development to produce an understanding that is properly of the community of conversationalists rather than of any single one of them. This is distributed intelligence (p. 32).

Common ground or “that part of the speaker’s and his listener’s knowledge, beliefs and assumptions that are shared” (Clarke, 1992, p. 61), gives a semi-structured contextual dimension to intersubjective information and knowledge practice. Evidence of common ground can be found in physical or linguistic co-presence and in community membership. Common ground is often tacitly assumed by the context of the communication, which can result in either shared meaning or divergent meanings, both of which contribute to individual and group learning. Thus, intersubjective communicating through language in conversation and talk in a semi-structured space such as the public library where the values and beliefs are often known, and where membership is known, is a critical aspect of organizational knowledge creation and sharing for learning and unlearning.

Not only is the reference interaction a site for social and relational knowledge sharing, but so too are communities of practice similar examples of such semi-structured information and knowledge sharing contexts. Reference librarians call upon their respective “communities of practice,” (Wenger, 1998) to assist them in their provision of information to clients. Communities of practice are a very important source of any organization’s knowledge and information sharing practices. While these communities have always existed, it is only recently in the study of organizational learning and knowledge
management that the underlying conceptual theory has been defined and developed by Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002). These communities are the informal groups of individuals with a common interest or practice. Communities of practice provide a structure for us to recognize the socially situated dimensions of information and knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991, 2000). Communities of practice are also self-described learning communities and this aspect helps to distinguish them from similar groups such as social networks or teams. Members of a community of practice focus on sharing, using and expanding their knowledge of a particular domain. In discussions of the social life of information, the flow or communication process between and among knowers is emphasized (Brown & Duguid, 1991, 2000; Dervin, 1999). Whereas the focus of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) is on the shared causal and principled values and beliefs among members of thought collectives, Wenger’s communities of practice are explained around members and their shared doing. While they may overlap, their differences are important and noteworthy. Librarians and library assistants might participate in a shared practice, without necessarily sharing the same intellectual epistemic belief systems.

In many libraries the readers’ advisory function is supported by a community of practice – a group of readers (staff members and occasionally clients) who have identified themselves to each other, who share their interests and their work, and who are willing to be called upon to assist in answering questions at an information desk. Communities of practice can also exist around specific domains that may not be officially represented in an organizational structure, such as a community of self-described techies – library staff who have a demonstrated interest and expertise in the use of software and web-based applications for library-related activities.

As Wenger (1998) notes, communities of practice differ from the formal organizational units in that they are self-organizing although

they may at times construct a conforming response to institutional prescriptions; they arise, evolve and dissolve according to their own learning, though they may do so in response to institutional events; and they shape their own boundaries, though their boundaries may at times happen to be congruent with institutional boundaries (p. 241).

To nurture processes of sensemaking, (un)learning and responding or adapting in any organizational setting, it is important to identify and nurture communities of practice.

Knowledge sharing is a social practice where communication, learning and meaning-making or understanding occurs. The public library’s reference and information service offers many opportunities for such enactments or events – both inside the organization
among the staff and at the institutional boundary between library client and library staff. The library building serves as the informed space that constitutes and is itself constituted by, these human interactions.

2.4.2 Organizational and information culture

“An organisation’s cultural knowledge consists of the beliefs it holds to be true based on experience, observation, reflection about itself and its environment…. Cultural knowledge includes the shared assumptions and beliefs that are used to describe and explain reality, as well as the criteria and expectations that are used to assign value and significance to new information” (Choo 2000, pp.396-397). Davenport & Prusak (1998) emphasize the beliefs and values aspects of an organization as the primary means of locating cultural knowledge. They note “people with different values see different things in the same situation and organize their knowledge by their values” (p.12).

Schein’s (1992) definition of organizational culture remains widely accepted as:

A pattern of shared assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valued, and, therefore, is to be taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1992, p. 247)

These shared assumptions are derived from the beliefs and values underlying the particular organization. A public library’s organizational culture stems from its values (Gorman, 2001), and also from its policies and practices as they originate primarily in organizational structures. For example, while one library may promote a customer-driven retail model of service, another may emphasize a social, community-development approach. Some libraries may have a service culture more strongly oriented to teaching and instruction whereas another may be oriented towards delivering “informational products.” And while these cultures are often difficult to see or identify easily, they are present in the everyday life of the organization. In public libraries, cultures can differ also across branches – where one branch is “known for” a certain kind of service and another is “known” differently.

Martin (2002) advocates a synthesis of three perspectives on organizational culture – differentiation, integration and fragmentation - in her comprehensive analysis of theoretical approaches. By understanding organizational culture simultaneously from these perspectives, the diversity and complexity of organizational knowledge production and use is implied; cultural knowledge is not only that which is shared, but can be that knowledge and information which differentiates or fragments sub-cultures in an organization.
Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) note that studies of organizations have not recognized the importance of culture. They identify three shortcomings in previous research:

First most studies have not paid enough attention to the potential and creativity of human beings. Second, the human being, in most cases, is seen as an information processor, not as an information creator. And third, the organization is portrayed as rather passive in its relation to the environment, neglecting its potential to change and to create (p.42).

Certainly culture has become much more important in the past decade as an influential factor in predicting an organization’s strategic success. Based on previous studies, including their own, De Long & Fahey (2000) note the two most important organizational behaviours that help shape a knowledge and information sharing culture as a) sharing and teaching and b) dealing with mistakes.

Choo et al (2007) studied the effects of one aspect of an organization’s culture, specifically its information culture, on the introduction of an information management program in a large law firm. Their study reports that four out of six types of information values previously identified by Marchand, Kettinger & Rollins (2001) were significant factors in explaining the outcomes of information use: sharing, proactiveness, transparency and informality. Moreover, the study also results suggest that in this case, the informational aspects of organizational culture that have been missing in previous studies could benefit our future understandings of how information is used in organizations, building on Marchand et al’s (2001) framework. There is an information culture in every organization and it behoves us to understand it especially as it is embedded in organizational practices and notions of organizational identity. How might we characterize the public library’s organizational and informational cultures – how is information and knowledge created, shared and used? And how does information culture play a role in the provision of reference and information services?

The contrast between how public and private organizations operate in these ways, can be understood by studying the organizational culture of each sector (Milner, 2000). By understanding of the differences in organizational culture and thus how an organization’s cultural knowledge is produced, we progress in our understanding of how knowledge and information management might be more effectively implemented in public sector organizations such as municipal public libraries. Research on government and public sector reform over the past two decades documents the reform agendas of various governments internationally. The message often sounds like this: “a process of organisational change has accompanied the managerial revolution in the public sector and is oriented towards the
development of post-bureaucratic organisational forms. These changes have been pursued with relatively limited empirical understanding of organisational culture in the public sector” (Parker & Bradley 2000, p.136). Milner (2000) brings together a number of the issues relevant to the study of current information and knowledge management practices in the public sector:

Of course, it is right to acknowledge that organisations in the public sector are subject to a range of environmental factors, such as complex issues of accountability, changing political agendas and a perceived absence of an underlying profit motive – not usually associated with the commercial sector, where so much of the focus upon issues of information and knowledge management has so far taken place (p. x).

Organizational culture and sub-cultures also influence the street-level librarian’s performance. Foster-Fishman & Keys (1997) studied the effects of management’s “empowerment endeavours” or efforts to improve decision-making by street-level workers in a state-wide government agency using an organizational culture framework. The role of organizational culture in an organization’s knowledge sharing and use practices cannot be overlooked.

Martin (2002) summarizes the methodological dilemmas in cultural research, noting historical preferences along the quantitative/qualitative methodological spectrum. These include sample adequacy and its effects, the tendency towards managerially oriented culture studies, the need for bias avoidance in quantitative studies, the dangers of too narrowly operationalizing culture variables such as cultural identity and the need for reflexivity. She advocates a hybrid or multi-method approach and gives direction on methods which are particularly suited to organizational cultural studies – for example, the use of surveys on the quantitative side and more ethnographic approaches such as conversational analysis or short-term ethnographies from the qualitative perspective. This study addresses these concerns in assessing the organizational culture and sub-cultures of the public library by exploring the documented, reported and observed methods of information and knowledge sharing in the delivery of reference service.

A recent UK study of public sector health care professionals across four agencies (Taylor & Wright, 2004) concludes that “effective knowledge sharing is shaped by wider organizational issues beyond the dynamics of interactions between sharer and receiver” (p.28). The authors identify six factors related to organizational culture and information infrastructure that influence knowledge sharing among public sector professionals: 1) open leadership climate 2) learning from failure 3) information quality 4) performance orientation 5) satisfaction with change process and 6) a vision for change.
In this section I have introduced the origins of the public library’s interest in knowledge through Shera’s work on social epistemology. I have introduced Choo’s (2006) knowing organization as a theoretical foundation for the study of the public library as knowledge organization. I then outlined how three types of knowledge might be observed ‘at work’ in the reference and information desk practices of a public library, from both the organizational and the local perspectives. I have noted the organizational processes of sensemaking, knowledge creation, sharing, and use, the use of communication structures including mental models, common ground and the presence of structures for organizational learning such as communities of practice. Finally I note the importance of organizational culture as a basis for knowledge creation and sharing. All of these aspects of the public library as knowing organization are relevant as intellectual contextualization of the practice of reference as enacted by librarians.

2.4.3 The human dimension of libraries

We also believe the ineluctable human touch was operative in many of the encounters between librarian and client that we observed or studied (p.91 emphasis mine, Nardi & O’Day, 1999)

The knowing organization is a people-centered organization, where the human elements of knowledge and information practice provide the creativity, the innovation that enables effective information and knowledge sharing, learning and enactments. Public libraries have traditionally been depicted as collections of materials, rather than as organizations providing expert mediated access into these collections and in this way, once again, the knowledge objects (e.g., the book collection) dominate the foreground in many citizens’ library-imaginations. In the background are the human agents who organize, structure and mediate access to these knowledge collections and who intersubjectively create meaning and understanding with their citizen clients. In the Google-dominated information world, and the world of intelligent “bots,” the question is regularly being tabled for discussion – is there still a role for this human agency in mediating knowledge and information access in public library services (Miller & Pellen, 2007)? I continue with the perspective already presented previously that even the library as a knowing organization must sustain human interactions to achieve its goals of learning, unlearning, sense making, extending its capabilities, and imagining creative and rational solutions to complex challenges. The following discussions of librarians as the organization’s human face at the boundary, illustrate the qualities of librarianship as supported by current research and practice.
2.4.4 Librarians as keystone species

Alongside the library’s landscape of ICT, advances in communications and the growth of the Internet, the practice of librarianship has also come under intensive scrutiny during the past decade. Despite its mission to act as each community’s knowledge commons, public libraries continue to seek economic efficiencies through reductions in human services, arguing that the species is perhaps becoming redundant. A self-serve approach to customer service, more dependence on information and communication technologies, increasing use of outsourced information services—these are organizational trends that are effectively re-assigning the human dimension of information and knowledge management to objects.

Nardi & O’Day (1999) define a library as an information ecology, “a place where people and technology come together in congenial relations, guided by the values of the library” (p.41). They further elaborate that librarians are a keystone species, “a species that influences the ecological composition, structure, or functioning of its community far more than its abundance would suggest” (p.57). Disproportionate to the size of their population, librarians have a larger sustaining role in the information environment of their community than one might know through observation or direct experience. Whereas Nardi & O’Day (1999) study librarians serving specialized clients including scientists at an advanced technology innovation company, public library specialists typically operate in an environment with much less requirement for knowledge and specialization. The question is still debated however, about whether or not public librarians still have any informational expertise that would be missed.

A further characteristic of a keystone species is that its sustaining importance is often hard to detect, either until it is no longer present, or until it is of such a diminished capacity, that health of the entire ecosystem or community is at risk. From the ecology and biodiversity movement, the biologist cautions, “the loss of a keystone species is like a drill accidentally striking a powerline. It causes lights to go out all over” (Edward O. Wilson in Nardi & O’Day, 1999, p.79).

Van House & Sutton (1996) also take an ecological approach to the future of librarianship but their analysis is more pessimistic. Unless LIS professionals can successfully compete by pre-empting the jurisdiction of other professions, or through “endless jockeying for control over [their] professional niches” (p.59) in the knowledge ecology, they will be pushed out through horizontal evolution or hybridization from other professions. They recommend two approaches for successfully competing in a knowledge
or information ecology. LIS professionals must demonstrate an effective, subject knowledge or “task domain” and we must prove we have a superior abstract knowledge base, that will be most relevant and responsive to an ecology’s changing needs. Using the Internet as the information ecology spawning competition, Van House & Sutton (1996) argue that we must demonstrate via both abstraction (theory) and reduction (practice) our cognitive claims to the area. And “the judges in this competition are the law, the public and the employers” (p.59).

As more information is available online and more people are becoming more adept at using online searching tools, it is legitimate to ask if, “as do-it-yourself information finding in cyberspace becomes more common, will librarians go the way of custom tailors – unusual and perhaps a little antiquated?” (Nardi & O’Day, 1999, p.80). This question is being asked in many, similar ways, across many organizations (Harris & Wilkinson, 2001; Milne, 2000; Mizrachi, 1998; Rowley, 2003).

If we accept that 21st century North American society is aptly characterized as a knowledge economy or an information society, dominated by technology, and if we can demonstrate that librarianship embodies the most appropriate theory and practice to sustain this knowledge base, then by ecological necessity, the practice of librarianship has never been so important to the larger community. Harris & Wilkinson (2001) characterize much of this discussion as “the theme of survival” (p.290) for librarianship.

2.4.5 Librarians as street-level bureaucrats

Maack (1997) proposes a client-centered typology of professions. Library and Information Science (LIS) is included in “Empowering Professions,” along with education and social work. She further characterizes the client-professional relationship according to three classes of this typology, and empowerment ideology is central to the relationship. Empowering library professionals engage in “knowledge mediation and sharing” and “partnership in decision-making; professionals assist library “clients [to] work / progress toward greater autonomy” (p.285).

Harris (1992) also argues for librarianship to retain a client-centered emphasis, based on ‘helping’ attributes typically regarded as “female” characteristics. She explores empowerment themes through a feminist approach, and through the literature of professionalism with particular attention to other helping professions. While focussing on the professional rather than on the client, Harris affirms that the empowerment-oriented “ideal of service” practiced by librarians, from a decidedly female perspective, is worthwhile and should be preserved (p.19).
Birdsall (1995) similarly characterizes the profession of librarianship through an empowerment framework. He suggests that librarians are among the “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980), alongside social workers and teachers providing a social good and service to the public (p.98). Birdsall adopts the language of the community psychologist (Rappaport, 1995) when he advocates that the “role of the librarian is therapeutic in that librarians share their expertise with their clients in order to allow clients to increase their own personal growth and self-sufficiency” (p.146). And like Harris and Maack, Birdsall uses an empowerment approach to characterize the role of the professional librarian.

In practical terms, why is the human face of librarianship, as represented by public service librarians in public libraries, necessary to the knowledge economy? What value do librarians add to the information-seeking and meaning-making experiences of public library and Internet users? How should librarians be adapting their values and practices, to an evolving technology-based, information ecology?

Much has been written about the mediating role of librarians in light of the development of digital or virtual libraries (Nardi & O’Day, 1999; Gorman, 2000; Zick, 2000). In fact, this mediating role has deep historical roots (Alfino & Pierce, 2001; Black, 1991, 2003; Birdsall, 1995; Harris, 1992; McCabe, 2001) and can be traced back to 1876 and an original notion that, in their educational role, librarians were required to “offer such assistance as was necessary to help these patrons locate materials” (Alfino & Pierce, 1997). Today in public libraries, librarians are that human interface whose roles include: enabling, facilitating, teaching, organizing, and accessing (Birdsall, 1995; Gorman, 2000; Nardi & O’Day, 1999). In public libraries branches, this mediating role is enacted primarily through the provision of reference and information services.

Radford’s (1999) study of the interpersonal communication processes between academic reference librarians and their clients is relevant in this context. In her qualitative study, the author conducted 27 observations and interviews with reference librarians and users to assess the relative importance of the relational versus the content dimensions of the communication process that occurs in a reference interview. Issues of trust and levels of disclosure by both librarian and user were found to be at least just as, if not more, important than the actual content dimensions of the encounter.

Librarians working in public libraries might also be characterized as members of their own epistemic community (Haas, 1992) “a network of [individuals or] professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (p. 3). Choo (2006; 2007)
suggests that entire organizations can be considered as epistemic communities. Such a community is distinct from other types of groups of experts such as communities of practice, as these members share both principle and causal beliefs, they share the same notions of validity or criteria for evaluation and the same approaches to professional practice for problem-solving. While librarianship is a profession, the sub-category of public librarians is also its own community of experts who both constitute and practice certain values specific to their particular kind of work and organization. For example, public librarians take a different approach to reference service than their academic counterparts; whereas the latter makes instruction and learning for the student the priority, the former group makes getting the information query resolved the highest priority (Beckerman & Gertzog, 1994; Gibbons, 2007). The difference is in the relative importance of certain values and beliefs about their services and their practices.

Public librarians, like the organizations they inhabit, share a set of epistemic values and beliefs that informs their decision-making, their actions, and their ability to affect policies in their organizations. However, such communities may not always be successful in bringing their influence and information expertise and causes to bear on their institutional policies because of more powerful bureaucratic demands of fulfilling the politically approved mission and meeting their budgets. The epistemic experts and the administrative experts can find their values and beliefs colliding according to these often political demands in the larger social context of the organization.

2.5 Chapter summary and key concepts

The preceding literature review identified central themes and critical concepts on which the following conceptual framework is based. It is intentionally broad and open-ended. These concepts are summarized in the following Figure 2-1.
I have constructed this landscape of the public library in the knowledge society based both on the current management and public library research and on the practice-based problems identified in that literature by practitioners themselves. This review also contains perhaps more questions than answers as a result of this wide and constructed approach. At present, as illustrated here, there is no single predominant and widely endorsed response to the public library’s challenges outlined in Chapter One, in the research literature. I have deliberately focused on the library as a knowing organization because this framework is comprehensive, and draws extensively from LIS theory and research. With its focus on organizational knowledge and information management and continuous learning, it offers perhaps the best available means of addressing the library’s role in a knowledge society.

Three dimensions or roles of a contemporary urban public library have been explored and, I assert, are critical to their future success and relevance to their communities: the public library as public (civic) space drawing on its political and philosophical foundations; the public library as its community’s knowing and learning organization; and the public library, in particular the reference or information service, as an essentially human service characterized by empowered, street-level professionals.

Choo’s (2006) knowing organization provides a structure for framing the library as a learning-centered organization. It is defined as the knowing organization and consists of...
three types of knowledge products or outcomes – tacit, explicit and cultural – created through three interdependent and iterative organizational knowledge processes – knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge use or decision-making. Because tacit knowledge is socially contextualized, often mediated through organizational culture and because it is based on experiential learning, understanding and observing the processes of knowledge sharing and use, will be emphasized. An organization’s values and culture also mediate its performance as a knowing organization. The public library has a unique organizational culture consisting of traditional, long-held values that are also being revisited in this age of advanced information and communications technology. Exploring the public library as a knowing organization might offer public libraries another way of understanding their role in this changing information environment.

By focusing on the public library’s reference service as an exemplar ecology and building on Nardi & O'Day’s ethnographic study of an equivalent service in a special library, I can explore both the nature of the library’s organizational culture and sub-cultures in this context and the nature of the library’s knowledge processes of creation, sharing and use across the institution / client boundary. In Chapter Three I present the specific study research questions and the conceptual framework that structure my research approach as ethnographic participant observer.
In this chapter I present a provisional framework as the theoretical context for my study. Using the literature review presented in Chapter Two as my landscape, I present one interpretive lens as a way of orienting my approach to the problem described and to the research questions introduced here. By design, this perspective is intended to be open enough so that there is opportunity for multiple understandings or meanings. And while this perspective is in no way the only one that could be used, its strength is that it recognizes these multiple structural and belief-driven contexts and processes in which the reference interaction occurs and it recognizes a dynamic relationship between the library as organization and the reference desk as a library service.

3.1 Research problem
The larger question that I have been following throughout the literature review is this: can the public library really behave or practice as a knowing organization in Choo's (2006) terms — that is, according to the definition he provides and thus succeed in this knowledge-based society? This framework is potentially the most inclusive in so far as it offers way of looking at the entire organization and because it provides ways to differentiate the human knowledge and knowing (tacit and cultural) from the technology oriented knowledge (explicit).

As noted in the literature review of Chapter Two, knowledge, data and information are concepts that have been and continue to be the subject of much debate, research and philosophical writings. In LIS research information is defined somewhat problematically as “data presented in readily comprehensible form to which meaning has been attributed within the context of its use”. However when applied, “meaning” “use” and “context” are interpreted as subjective terms and their subjectivist interdependence often poses challenges to researchers. Knowledge as a concept is perhaps even more problematic (Huizing 2007b). It is often studied as an individual or cognitive, experiential concept in the form of tacit knowledge (Tsoukas, 2005), as an organizational concept required for learning (Wenger, 1998), as a strategic asset, an object-based technology (explicit knowledge), and

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more recently as a concept of organizational practice (Choo, 2006; Huizing 2007b; Spender & Scherer, 2007). For this study I accept that there are often few firm distinctions between the concepts of “information” and “knowledge” in the broadest sense. I adopt a “pluralist” approach to knowledge and knowing in the epistemological sense (Spender & Scherer, 2007, p. x) as much as possible. Where appropriate I qualify discussions by using more specific terms. For example, tacit knowledge is understood as experiential or practiced “meaning” typically derived through human processes of sensemaking; explicit knowledge is understood as knowledge contained in objects (e.g., books and repositories) and the term information in the narrowest library usage (e.g., accessing information) is similar in meaning to this explicit or object-centered knowledge.

Exploring these concepts in the public library context might yield information and knowledge for both practitioners and future researchers, about how the library could change or adapt itself to become more like that theoretical ideal. Because if the public library can achieve something like this theoretical ideal in practice, then perhaps it will not only survive, but it will indeed thrive in this knowledge society. Many public libraries use the rhetoric or discourse of being a “knowledge-based” organization both from a managerial perspective and from a service delivery perspective without perhaps either fully appreciating what that means. And the market ideology is a narrow context in which the library operates. In other words, there is more to learn in exploring ways for the public library to adapt itself to the 21st century knowledge-oriented society. To bring this broadly stated issue into focus, the research problem is defined as follows:

*Public libraries report that their communities’ demands for reference and information services are changing and that these services are generally experiencing declining use due to the increased availability of online information and other types of information sources.*

*Further, public libraries are actively seeking new ways to re-conceptualize their provision of reference and information services to stay relevant to their communities and to be valued within their local knowledge economies.*

*More research on how services are being used, organized, managed and evaluated in this context is needed to inform these decisions.*

### 3.2 Research questions

The specific research questions that I address in this study focus on knowledge and knowledge sharing and the public library’s organizational culture, values and beliefs, as they are enacted at the real world library-community boundary of the reference desk, in the provision of reference and information services. Questions #1 and #2 address types of
knowledge and types of knowledge processes which are at work in the reference desk interactions. Question #3 addresses the role of organizational culture in the form of beliefs and values and cultural knowledge as they enable or constrain information and knowledge sharing processes at the reference desk. While the first and second questions focus the researcher squarely on the reference desk practice in action, the third question requires that the researcher focus on how management and the reference desk interpret the library’s beliefs, values and culture in the provision of the reference service.

### Research Questions

**Q1:** What types of knowledge are created, shared and used by library staff and their clients in the provision of reference service, in urban public libraries?

**Q2:** What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients’ reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?

**Q3:** What role, if any, do the public library (as organization) and the branch library reference unit’s beliefs, values and organizational culture both documented and enacted, play in knowledge sharing and use processes between and among library reference staff and

Because there are many levels of complexity in larger, contemporary organizations, and because I am interested in gathering ethnographic data to complement published research already available on library performance measurements, I have selected the reference desk and practice as a potential exemplar of Choo’s (2006) knowing organization as my field of study. There are other library services that could also be studied to answer these same types of research questions, such as the circulation desk where clients check out their books, or library programming where clients access information through formal library-guided instruction; however, the reference desk is particularly well-suited as a site to study this problem and to address these questions for these reasons: a) reference and information services remain a core information service of public libraries; b) reference and information services are receiving increasing competition from Google and other Internet information sources and so are more at risk of obsolescence in one view; c) the traditional and evolving virtual and in-person library reference service still employs human mediation while making extensive use of information technologies; and d) reference and information
services have been characterized as information seeking and use processes – inviting the question of whether or not other types of information or knowledge sharing and use occurs.

The study participants are from three groups: the library reference staff, the reference service clients and the library management. These participants are members in different but inter-related structures: the branch library reference work group, the library community and the library management or organization. The research questions suggest a study of three sets of specific and inter-related knowledge and information interactions where these actors are direct participants:

1. The information and knowledge sharing interactions between the street-level reference desk staff and their clients, face-to-face in the library’s branch library spaces.

2. The information and knowledge sharing practices between and among the street-level reference desk staff members as a branch library work group.

3. The organizational and cultural information and knowledge interactions between the street-level reference desk staff in each of three branch libraries and their library management.

3.3 Conceptual framework

As depicted in Figure 3-1 there are two perspectives that set the library’s reference practice in context for this study. From an external perspective, the public library is influenced by the political and ideological context or environment in which it operates and it is influenced by its individual citizen clients and communities or users who participate in library services. The second perspective is an internal or organizational perspective – the library as knowing organization – co-constituted or enacted jointly by the management and street-level services and spaces.
The external dimension which is characterized as the political and ideological context of the library has been characterized in Chapters One and Two as transactional and objectivist. Many public libraries operate more explicitly with a market-based orientation where their services are products and their patrons are customers. In this sense the reference practice is one of the library’s functions which creates and provides information and knowledge products for library customers who approach the staff at these desks. Moreover the reference interview is commonly characterized as a transaction which also suggests this market orientation. Figure 3-1 indicates that individual citizens and citizen groups or communities inform the political and ideological context in so far as they elect their municipal representatives who direct the library through citizen and elected representatives appointed to the library’s governing Board. Public libraries in Ontario are legislated provincially by the Ontario Municipal Act (RSO 2001) and by the Ontario Public Libraries Act (RSO 2002). These external forces direct the library as knowing organization depicted here from a management perspective representing the library’s management and administration and the street-level services such as reference services, lending services, and programming among others. Library policy moves through the organization from the political/Board to
management then to the street-level services. While street-level services can provide input into how the library services are managed, it is advisory and informal. The public library organization remains an organization with a hierarchical management structure.

Figure 3-2 Concepts of the reference practice in the library as knowing organization unpackages the internal perspective identified as the public library as a knowing organization. The library as knowing organization is mutually enacted by both the street-level staff providing reference service and by the library’s management and administration. These dimensions cannot be interpreted separately as they are co-constituted through the information processes presented here. However, because the library is a hierarchical structure, management very clearly has responsibility for direction of the street-level staff through its formulation and promotion of the library’s organizational identity including its beliefs and values. The library management also develops and implements the strategic directions for the organization through articulation of the mission and vision and through the creation and implementation of strategic and financial planning processes.

The information processes noted here reflect those processes where information is required by both management and the reference staff to communicate and make sense of their external environments, and to create information and knowledge for the practice of reference in the library’s larger context. Both management and the reference practice are also jointly responsible for their shared organizational learning, performance and use of information and communication technologies in the provision of this service. Organizational culture of the library is also jointly constructed and adapted. Three types of knowledge are available to both management and staff in the organizational practice of reference – explicit or codified knowledge available through information technologies and documentation, the organization’s cultural knowledge and the tacit or experiential knowledge created and shared in this reference discourse.

In its entirety, the library as knowing organization is responsible for the information use processes of sensemaking, knowledge creation and sharing and decision-making for purposes of both shaping and responding to its changing environment; for the purpose of extending its base of knowledge and capabilities including the ability to unlearn old assumptions and beliefs; and for the purpose of making decisions to meet increasingly complex challenges (Choo, 2006, p.4).
The reference practice as a street-level service and the reference desk are the unit and the site of the study respectively. The concepts guiding my observations include sensemaking, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing practices at the desk between and among the staff and clients; the library’s organizational identity and culture and local branch sub-cultures; the information relationships between and among staff and their clients; the presence of tacit and explicit knowledge in the reference practice; the “fields of connection” (Nardi, 2005) between and among library staff and clients; and evidence of organizational learning. All of what is already well known and highly prescribed about the reference encounter including the client’s sensemaking perspective (Dervin, 1977) and the librarian’s reference interview (Radford, 1999; Ross et al, 2002) also forms key concepts for use during my observations.

Finally at the boundary of the reference desk and the library organization are the citizens who interact with the reference staff in presenting and mutually resolving their information needs. The primary activity of the reference desk involves communicating with library clients to help or enable the clients themselves to resolve their information problems or gaps. This framework can be summarized as having three perspectives to address the
research questions – two external perspectives and one internal or organizational perspective

1. The library’s political and ideological context;
2. The library’s clients and communities;
3. The management and the street-level reference staff as they jointly deliver the reference and information service in their public spaces using information processes.

These perspectives are interpreted through the lens of my adapted version of Choo’s (2006) knowing organization. Figure 3-3 summarizes this framework with brief descriptions of these relationships.

Figure 3-3 – The reference practice in the public library as knowing organization

As a conceptual tool, this framework guides this study and provides provisional boundaries and structure to the researcher in her role as participant observer. The
information processes as they are described are adapted from Choo (2006, p.4) who characterizes a knowing organization in active, engaged and strategic terms: “it [a knowing organization] possesses information and knowledge so that we are well informed, mentally alert, and aware of threats and opportunities. Its actions are based upon a shared understanding of the organization’s context and aspirations, and are leveraged by the available knowledge and skills of its members.” This framework provides a means of addressing these research questions by uncovering the knowledge creating and sharing practices at the reference desk and by understanding how local desk sub-cultures interact with the organizational culture and identity articulated and enacted by library management. If we can understand more about how this social information practice (reference) works within its host organization (public library) that is in the process of re-inventing itself within its local knowledge economy, then we might understand more about how human mediation and technology collaborate to constitute a rich social information practice.

The next chapter presents a detailed description of how the study is situated as an exploratory, ethnographic case of this conceptually defined reference practice in its own knowing organization. This chapter is followed by two chapters where the reference transaction is interpreted as an interaction and where reference service is interpreted as a relational practice. In the final chapter, (Chapter Seven), I return to the ideas introduced in this conceptual framework in a theoretical discussion of the reference service as epistemic practice.
Chapter Four
Research approach and procedures

4.1 Research paradigm

With this naturalistic approach, Burawoy (1998) argues for a methodological duality, a coexistence and interdependence of the two models of science – reflexive science and positive science – through the “extended case method” (p.1). He further emphasizes the importance of this critical reflexive perspective for studying social practices and social contexts; knowledge is acquired through “reconstructing” theories that precede and then follow from our individual studies. A reflexive approach highlights the researcher’s critical perspective, and “instead of discovering grounded theory, we elaborate existing theory” (p.16) by finding not “confirmations but theory’s refutations” using dialogue as the participant researcher’s primary process. In this way, the reflexive approach is set apart from the narrower constructivist perspective. Burawoy also emphasizes the differences between positivism and reflexivity characterized as a subjectivist / objectivist tension:

This ‘dwelling in’ theory is at the basis of what I call the reflexive model of science – a model of science that embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge. Reflexive science starts out from dialogue, virtual or real, between observer and participants, embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself. Objectivity is not measured by procedures that assure an accurate mapping of the world but by the growth of knowledge…. Reflexive science elevates dialogue as its defining principle and intersubjectivity between participant and observer as its premise. It enjoins what positive science separates: participant and observer, knowledge and social situation, situation and its field of location, folk theory and academic theory. (p 5, 14).

Ethnographers seek to make these familiar settings strange by critically studying what we have often taken as natural or neutral in our environments (Segall, 2001) and it can be characterized as constructivist in this way. Through a constructivist lens, however, meaning typically stabilizes or converges into a single understanding of a social practice. Social scientists use ethnography when we want to understand a situation in some depth from a social, contextualized point of view, when we cannot neatly isolate variables or patterns or specific activities, and when we want to understand meanings behind the situational particularities, enacted in their entirety. An ethnographer describes a world and from that description, opens doors to multiple understandings. Law (2004) characterizes this duality of research methods’ “in-hereness” and the field’s external “out-thereness” as an “enacted methods assemblage” where difference and multiplicity of meanings are chronic
conditions. This study takes a reflexive perspective to the study of reference practice. As noted by Czarniawska (2004) “traditional” ethnographies can be limited by the “different rules of accounting that appear to be ascribed to specific situations” (p. 4), or in Law’s terms, by an opposing dualism of the in-here versus the out-there perspectives of researcher and practitioner. This study attempts to overcome this narrower view using narrative both as one of multiple “mode[s] of knowing” and using narration as one of multiple “mode[s] of communication” (p. 6).

However, in recognizing a further inherent weaknesses of using ethnography to establish realistic truths or conversely, of explaining inconsistencies by adopting a wholly constructed, relativistic view that this is just another view of the world, we are asked to introduce a “more subtle form of realism” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 73) into our work. Subtle realism retains elements of both aspects of ethnographic research traditions, but is distinctive “in its rejection of the notion that knowledge must be defined as beliefs whose validity is known with certainty” (p. 74). I address this theoretical tension of single/multiple realities at the point of data analysis.

This is a study of the information desk practice in a public library setting and in this sense, it is a study of a particular social world in its lived moments. As has been described in the preceding chapter, the central activity that we believe occurs at the reference desk is the reference encounter or inquiry (Ross et al, 2002). And theoretically, at least, this process is highly structured. This activity as it is enacted at the library reference desk, however, is often not quite as neat as the reference information transaction is defined by its espoused theories; as a social practice it can be messy and relatively disorderly. For the purpose of this study, then, the reference desk practice is defined as any and all face-to-face interaction(s) or encounter(s) between and among the reference staff and their clients, occurring at or near the public library reference desk. It includes all aspects of the interactions in so far as they can be observed to the participant researcher.

4.2 Study design
This study employs the extended case (Burawoy, 1998) from an ethnographic perspective as the methodological framework. It can also be characterized as an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) in that it is a case “examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (p. 437). It is a “case” of reference practices in one urban public library system that incorporates study of the three dimensions of library as knowledge space, the library as knowing organization, and the human dimension of the librarian-client
interaction together named as “reference practice” in a public library’s institutional context. Therefore, it is not strictly a case study of this library system, nor any of its individual branch libraries; it is a case study of a particular social and informational practice (reference practice) contextualized by its own particular Canadian urban public library institution (URPLO). ¹³ As with any case study, however, the purpose is first and foremost to learn, to create a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the case itself. Generalizability of study findings is not nor cannot be the goal, introducing the “one-case problem” (Sutton, 1993, p. 416).

The choice to study reference services in multiple branches across one library system rather than simply at one branch library within this library system was a deliberate methodological choice to gather as much data as possible to address the research questions. This choice also supports the goal of selecting a case where there is the most opportunity to learn (Stake, 2000). Multiple sites offering the same core reference service directed by the same library board and administration but differentiated by local organizational culture, by library community, and by staffing and building spaces provide a variety of perspectives on the reference desk as a practice and in this way, add depth and richness to the data being collected.

This study is bounded in three key ways: theoretically, organizationally and physically. The public library’s reference service – its staff, physical space, collections and technologies – is identified as a discrete service within the library’s larger program and for members of the public; the physical point of interaction is also clearly designated in each location, by both the organization and by library clients, through the use of signage, physical orientation and staffing. Moreover the reference practice is also conceptually well bounded in the LIS literature – including theories of information seeking, studies of the reference process, and the reference service as it is organized and offered from a library management perspective. Since this study focuses only on the face-to-face reference practices, telephone and virtual services are excluded from the study. Finally, the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Three defines the concepts being explored in the context of the public library’s reference practice.

The major challenge in assessing the quality of an ethnographic case study lies in assessing the effectiveness of the participant researcher because the researcher is the primary ‘instrument’ for both conceptualizing the study, for bringing her “reflective understanding” (Burawoy, 1998, p.6) to the extended case, for data collection, analysis and

¹³ As a requirement of the ethics protocol for this study, the urban public library organization studied is not named but is referred to as URPLO as a proper name, or as the library organization.
finally, for uncovering interpretations and understandings. A later section, 4.5 Researcher Role, discusses this role in detail and addresses how I as participant observer conducted myself as simultaneously a participant insider and a theoretical and interpretive outsider in this study.

This study is positioned as an extended case study in Burawoy’s (1998) terms because it attempts to employ a “methodological duality” bridging the positivist and scientific models with reflexivity:

where positive science proposes to insulate subject from object, reflexive science elevates dialogue as its defining principle and intersubjectivity between participant and observer as its premise. It enjoins what positive science separates: participant and observer, knowledge and social situation, situation and its field of location, folk theory and academic theory. (p.14)

Thus, from a methodological design stance, this study is highly reflexive and reflective as demonstrated explicitly by my on-going dialogue with my study participants, my dialogue with myself via field notes, with my study advisory team and finally with my readers.

4.3 Selection of research sites

Public library systems differ in many ways across Canada and across western countries according to geography, demographic profiles of the client groups, history of the library organization, local government politics including budgeting processes, accountability, and their positions within the municipal government structure. Notwithstanding these innate “personality” differences, however, all public library systems provide the same basic core services and collections in similar distribution models through branch library networks, and within similar fiscal and organizational structures. Although public libraries are legislated provincially in Canada, large urban libraries also report their inputs, outputs and performance measurements in one annual report through one organizational network – the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) – formerly the Canadian Association of Large Urban Public Libraries (CALUPL). In so doing, the public libraries invite comparisons between and among each other of their various organizational units of analysis and service levels; rankings of various service indicators are also explicitly tabulated and published annually (Canadian public library statistics, 2006).14

The focus of this study is on the reference services offered in branch libraries within one urban public library organization (URPLO). This organization was selected both for practical reasons of site accessibility and because it is a member of the Council of Urban

14 See Canadian Public Library Statistics http://www.mississauga.ca/portal/residents/librarystatistics

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Libraries in Canada (CULC). In addition, I have had a prior working relationship with this library system (described more fully later in section 4.9 – Researcher trustworthiness) and this prior experience also positively influenced my initial invitation to this library system to participate. I formally invited the library system to participate in this study in the fall of 2005, in a written and verbal presentation to the library’s senior management team. The library organization responded positively and a senior manager was named as my principal organizational contact.

In order to achieve the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) characteristic of ethnographic studies, this study consisted of observations and interviews at one pilot branch and three branch libraries within this library system. The pilot branch and three branches were selected because they represent a sample of the depth and breadth of the organization’s overall service delivery model and according to the purposive sampling practices described by Patton (1990). Branches in URPLO are defined within the organization by service level to reflect the range and types of services offered at the branch. These service tiers\(^{15}\) map approximately to small, medium and large sized library branches. This library system divides their branches according to the following tiers: Community 1, Community 2, Community 3, District and Central libraries. District branches are large regional hubs, equivalent in size and range of services offered to the single central library and thus these branches were categorized as district/central. The central library is distinguished as the organization’s main administrative and service coordination site, in addition to having the largest square footage of public space.

Selection of branch libraries as observation sites was conducted using purposive sampling techniques from three different perspectives (Patton, 1990): a) accessible sampling which involves choosing that which is practically possible; b) intensity sampling which means selecting “information rich” case that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely; and c) typical case sampling which highlights what is typical, normal or average in the particular sample. Selection criteria were developed in order to select branches and to meet the study’s objectives as follows:

i. English is the dominant language of interaction
ii. Presence of a separate, permanent reference desk
iii. Branches to be distributed among three service tiers
iv. Average to above average # of in-person users
v. Average to above average # of adult usage at reference desk

\(^{15}\) URPLO’s Service Delivery Model was approved in March 2003 and is described in a document made available to the researcher. According to the ethical guidelines of this study, this document cannot be included for the reader’s reference as it would clearly expose the organization being studied.

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vi. Average to above average # of reference questions received
vii. No exceptional physical or other differentiating features (e.g., co-located with another type of public facility)

To begin site selection process, I was given access to one month of reference desk usage statistics presented by branch, and then by various criteria within each branch. The number of open hours per branch was calculated and added to these data, to enable comparisons across all branches. The number of reference desk questions according to various criteria was then available on a per open hour basis. Thus, in addition to the criteria noted earlier, the sample reference statistics enabled adding the following further criteria to guide in selecting branches as observation sites:

viii. Percentage of questions answered taking more than 5 minutes per open hour
ix. Percentage of questions answered that required “general knowledge” per open hour
x. Percentage of questions answered that are classified as specifically readers advisory or reference queries (RAREF) per open hour
xi. Percentage of questions asked by adults and seniors combined per open hour

These additional criteria are useful in more specifically characterizing sites and they also support the “intensity sampling” technique whose purpose is “information richness.” Since this study specifically focuses on the reference practice, for which the reference question is the primary activity, the most common definition was used, and branches that had average to above average percentages of readers’ advisory and reference questions were noted. Branches answering more questions taking more than five minutes and using more “general knowledge” as categorized by the sample statistics, were noted as they could potentially offer more detail and richness for me as participant observer.

16 For the purposes of this study a reference transaction is defined as “A standard reference transaction is a request for information made directly by a library user that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff.” (Ontario Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Libraries Branch, 2006). This definition from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (2008) is very similar to the Ontario definition. It differentiates reference transactions from reference work and also informs the analysis of transactions presented in Chapter Five: “reference transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies or policy statements. Reference work includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools and services. Creation and management of information resources includes the development and maintenance of research collections, research guides, catalogs, databases, web sites, search engines, etc., that patrons can use independently, in-house or remotely, to satisfy their information needs. Assessment activities include the measurement and evaluation of reference work, resources and services. Retrieved at http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/protools/referenceguide/definitionsreference.cfm
Based on an analysis of all branches according to these criteria, a shortlist of eligible branches was established. I then presented this information to the library’s middle management committee consisting of managers of all branches and managers of all centralized library services. The results were discussed and other qualitative comments regarding suitable branches were put forward. For example, one of the potential Community 2 level branches, had its services affected by the opening of a new District level branch within the following three months. Service levels including reference desk services were expected to decline because the branch catchment areas overlap. Therefore, this branch was not a suitable site after the opening of the new District branch library. The outcome of this meeting was a list of six sites, two in each service tier, which met the selection criteria and which branches were recommended as typical, accessible and with sufficient intensity to provide richness for the research study.

I then contacted managers of all branches and inquired about their willingness to participate in the study. Through a series of conversations among all representatives addressing issues of scheduling and logistics, a final list of suitable branches was prepared and these branch managers were asked to invite their staff members to preliminary information meetings where the study could be described and more detailed information could be exchanged. The branches selected were PB (Pilot branch), SB (small branch), MB (middle branch) and LB (large branch). Brief profiles of these branches (excluding PB) are provided in Chapter Five, which introduces study findings.

4.4 Site participation
In order to ensure the smoothest entry into and exit from the study sites, I established a study advisory committee whose purpose was to provide guidance and assistance to me about facilitating access to the study sites, on ensuring client and staff privacy was protected as required by the library’s own guidelines, on organizing and scheduling interviews, on providing documentation as requested, on informing library staff and clients about the study and on overall communications with the library organization and client groups. The five member advisory committee was made up of a senior manager, the manager of the library’s reference services, two branch library managers, and a front-line reference librarian. A library client was considered for the committee, but this idea was set aside given the difficulty in locating a suitable interested but not obviously biased library user. The advisory committee membership was established jointly by the Library and myself. A representative of this committee reviewed a draft of the study’s ethics protocol in detail. I also made two
information presentations to the senior management committee and to the middle level managers on the study’s overall purpose, objectives, research questions, and methods to be used, prior to being given approval by the site.

Preliminary meetings were held at each branch library site to invite the staff to participate in the study. I presented an overview of the study including study purpose, goals, research questions and a detailed outline of the methods to be used. I discussed in detail the role of participant observer and then answered questions from branch staff. Following these presentations, the staff met separately to determine whether or not they would agree to participate in the study and I was notified of their decision by e-mail from the manager. The reference desk staff and the branch manager of each invited branch agreed to participate; no one declined to participate, although there were many questions answered about the process.

4.5 Researcher role

Using an ethnographic approach, I adopted the role of participant observer, a strategy referred to as an “omnibus field strategy in that ‘it simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection’” (Patton, 1990, p. 231). Further Patton (1990) explains, “ethnomethodologists are attempting to make explicit what might be called the group’s tacit knowledge, to extend Polanyi’s idea of tacit knowledge from the individual to the group…. Ethnomethodologists get at a group’s tacit knowledge by forcing it to the surface through disrupting violations of ordinary experience, because ordinary routines are what keep tacit knowledge at an unconscious, tacit level” (p. 75). Within this ethnomethodological tradition, I approached my study as a “narrative inquirer” whereby the data originate in the interactions from the experiences at the reference desk, as they are lived (Clandinnin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004). Just as ethnographers focus on the experiences as their foundation for theory building, narrative inquiry is also an experiential approach and thus is an appropriate research posture for conducting fieldwork. As defined by Clandinnin and Connelly,

Narrative inquiry is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interactions with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, … narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinnin & Connelly, 2000, 20).

Czarniawska (2004) advocates a narrative approach to social science research when she characterizes narrative as both a mode of knowing and a mode of communication.
4.6 Data collection

The primary data collection methods in field research are observation and intensive interviewing (Lofland et al, 2006). A naturalistic study requires the researcher to adopt a “participative immersion in the context” with a “healthy respect for the richness, density and ambiguity of social life” (Sutton, 1993, 416). In this sense this study of the knowledge sharing practices at the public library reference desk is a study of an informational practice within a semi-structured social context. Observation is also a well-established method for studying reference services (Whitlatch, 2000). Analysis of organizational documents directing the practice of the reference service provides a third means for the researcher to gather descriptive data about the reference service from that formal management policy perspective.

A pilot study was conducted at the beginning to the study period to test study tools including the observational framework and interview guides. The pilot study also enabled me to try my role as a participant observer at the desk – the results are reported in Section 4.6.4 Pilot test.

4.6.1 Observation

Although many studies of reference services are conducted using unobtrusive observation (Whitlatch, 2000), those studies often focus on evaluating the interpersonal attributes or the informational quality of the responses of the reference librarians. There are also many studies of the formally defined reference interview which employ obtrusive and unobtrusive observation data collection methods (Dervin & Dewdney, 1986; Ford, 2003; Radford, 1999). In this study the reference interview is interpreted more broadly to include all aspects of the interactions that occur between and among librarians and their clients. Given the highly exploratory nature of this study, and my background as former employee in this library system, obtrusive, participant observation is the most appropriate role to address these research questions.

Observations were restricted to adults as identified by observed estimate of age and were recorded by field notes on a laptop computer. I conducted observations in each branch library for a period of three to four weeks in each location, covering 15-20 open hours in each branch, distributed over the week including morning, afternoon, evening and weekend periods. The number of interactions observed in each location (excluding the pilot branch) differed and are summarized in Figure 4-1 below.
A saturation point (Bradley, 1993) was noted in each location at approximately the same elapsed period of time (four weeks) at which time I felt that my observations were no longer adding substantively to the existing data. However, more important to the approach of this study than the number of interactions, is that I immersed myself in the culture and practices of the reference desk, to become an “insider” (Jorgensen, 1989) in order to describe and understand the culture of the reference desk in the ethnographic tradition of Nardi & O’Day (1999). This extended engagement for approximately 170 hours of observation and completing 28 in-depth interviews, as a participant researcher, differs from previous reference studies where researchers typically collect “interactions” or “observations” over a more limited period (Ford, 2003) and leave the research site.

I recorded activities and conversations that occurred at these desks on my laptop computer and without audio-recording. An advantage of this approach is that the knowledge sharing and use processes within different sub-units can be compared within the same organizational culture in addition to aggregating results at the system level. Periodic information meetings were held during the study period. At each site, pre-observation and post-observation meetings were held with staff to facilitate my entry and exit into the research sites.

The primary interests for observation were types of knowledge used and shared. Types of knowledge, values and policies, roles and structures, processes and practices, tools and platforms were also preliminary categories for observation. An observational relationship matrix was piloted as a research tool but was discarded as a result of the pilot testing because the interactions being observed could not easily fit within the matrix. At the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Hours of observation</th>
<th>Number of interactions</th>
<th>Staff interviews</th>
<th>Client interviews</th>
<th>Manager interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small (SB)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 from across the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (MB)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (LB)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
remaining three sites I adopted a “free text” approach to recording my observations. Samples of these texts are presented in Appendix 14.

4.6.2 Interviews

Interviews with librarians, library staff and clients who were observed at the reference desks were conducted. Permanent reference desk staff were interviewed and these participants were selected by invitation and by accessibility. Participants from all levels of staff were represented in the interviews. The decision to interview library staff members throughout the organizational hierarchy allowed me to have a 360 degree perspective on the reference service as a core library service.

Patrons interested in being interviewed were solicited in a variety of ways: signs were posted inviting patrons to either contact staff or contact me directly expressing their interest. In addition, I approached individuals whom I observed based on their verbal expression of interest in the study and their acknowledgement of me at the reference desk. Because very few patrons expressed interest in being interviewed, I asked the staff to consider identifying individuals who might be interested and to approach them on my behalf. This strategy was most successful in recruiting patrons for in-depth interviews. Two library patrons whom I approached declined to participate in an interview.

Only demographic data including gender and approximate years of experience using public libraries were collected from clients interviewed. Interviews were open-ended and were focused on the respondent’s experience with the reference desk services, their attitudes towards and experiences in using library technologies, their attitude towards libraries and learning, towards the library’s traditional roles and their expectations and desires of future public library service generally and reference services in particular. Interviews looked for further meaning and understanding to the observed conversations. In order to capture the client’s perceptions and understandings from their own knowledge perspective, I contextualized the interviews as conversations that would touch on a variety of topics and that would probe for stories about the respondent’s previous experiences with and attitudes about the library and in particular, the reference desk services.

In these interviews, I adopted the posture of “narrative inquirer” whereby (Bates, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Flick, 2000; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). One interview guide was developed. However, questions were worded differently to reflect the two different audiences - library staff and library clients. As a participant researcher, with experience in the research setting, I am familiar with the different terminologies used by both
staff and clients when referring to various aspects of the library’s services. For example, clients often refer to the “computers” as being both the “library catalogue” and “public Internet” work stations.

Management or elite interviews with the library administration from the level of branch coordinator to middle manager, senior manager and finally chief executive of the library were conducted. These interviews were held at the end of the period of observations and were structured similarly as conversations. Clarification on any disparities that arose between the library’s written policy and the observed practice at a reference area were probed during these interviews. Patton (1990) notes the importance of observing “what does not happen” in a qualitative research setting. Martin (1990) emphasizes three perspectives in understanding organizational culture including differentiation, fragmentation and integration. These interviews provided an opportunity to compare official understandings with the more informal practices, especially with regards to organizational culture and sub-cultures.

During the period in which this study was conducted, URPLO opened its newest branch library which had been conceptualized throughout its 3-year planning period and which was then described in the public promotion and media announcements as “the library of the future.” This new branch (NB) introduced a different style and structure of library service to the reference practice and was anecdotally referenced by all staff participants whom I observed at each location. Because this branch was identified by management as reflecting the ‘new model’ of reference service for the library, I opted to interview the management staff from this branch as well. These interviews were incorporated into the management cluster and became part of the analysis from that perspective.

4.6.3 Document analysis

The reference service in a public library is typically directed by a set of policies and procedures that guide and direct staff in performing their work. These documents are also used for training new staff members. These guidelines apply to all service points and can also indirectly imply service standards. URPLO has a number of documents that are relevant to the services provided at the reference desk such as the Reference and Information Services Guidelines, various public services manuals, the public Internet access policy, the Library’s mission, goals and values, the service delivery framework and others. All of these documents including any policies or procedures developed at the branch or by
the service manager including anything used in training new reference services staff were included in the document analysis.

My main areas of interest in reviewing these documents are: a) to identify types of knowledge and knowledge creation, sharing and use practices included in formal statements and b) to use the stated policies and procedures as a means of verifying observed action at the reference desk by library staff. Although many of these documents are also available to the public, some are internal documents only. In addition, in some branch libraries, yet other procedures or policies are in place to meet the particular needs of that location. I also reviewed these documents at the branches involved in the study. These documents are particularly relevant in addressing research question #3 regarding organizational culture because they provide a means of triangulating the observational and interview data.

4.6.4 Pilot test
I conducted a pilot study at fourth branch (PB) of URPLO before finalizing my observation and interview guides. The purpose of this pilot study was to assess all aspects of my methodological approach within this organization and to determine if my planned methods were, in fact, going to yield data that would be relevant in answering my research questions. This branch was selected using the same criteria as noted previously. I held an orientation meeting in April, 2006, where I took detailed notes around questions staff had both generally about my study and specifically about precisely what I would do and how I would orient myself at their reference desk. Following my orientation meeting, all staff were given the opportunity to participate or ‘opt-out’ of participating in the study. No staff member declined to opt out, although all admitted feeling a certain nervousness about my being there. I observed for 21 hours elapsed over four weeks in May and June, 2006. I collected 59 observations, conducted 5 interviews, 3 with staff members and 2 with library clients. As a result of the pilot study, I made the following adjustments to my approach and procedures for data collection:

a) I discarded my original more structured observational matrix in favour of recording observations through open text and use of field notes.

b) I modified my orientation script and information for branch staff to address particular questions that had arisen at the Pilot branch site. For example, staff had a clear expectation that as part of my study, I would also be evaluating the quality of their work. In all subsequent orientations, I was deliberately specific and repeated in my emphasis on my approach to this study – that is, I planned to observe the staff’s
interactions with each other and with their clients, and not render any judgements or evaluative statements about their work as reference staff.

c) I revised my interview guides for staff and clients creating thematic five categories with one or two open-ended questions in each category and by adopting a more informal conversational style and tone.

d) My attempts to indirectly solicit interviews from library clients through use of posters, and by expressing my interest if these patrons approached the information desk, yielded very little response. Initially I posted signs around the branch indicating that a study was taking place and inviting anyone interested to approach me. I also had information sheets printed and available at the circulation desk and the information desk. Prior to beginning my observations, staff were asked to refer any inquiries about this study to me or to the supervising librarian (in my absence). Staff were further asked to distribute information sheets so that they would not themselves have to explain this study. As I watched people at the desk, I made small verbal invitations to engage me in conversation. If anyone responded I would describe why I was there and then ask them if they would be interested in being interviewed for this study. When asked what the interview would be about, my response was that the interviews were about how and why they used the library. Generally, however, while many clients were friendly and interested, they stopped short of committing themselves to an interview. I also invited them to think about it and call me or come and see me again at the branch. During the pilot study I approached approximately 10 people in this way; however, only one person responded favourably and agreed to be interviewed. It was evident to me that I would have to change or add other ways of soliciting patron interviews. Originally I had considered advertising my study on the library’s website but the library manager was slightly reluctant to do so because it could invite more questions than anyone in the library would be capable of answering. Because this study was limited to a study in very specific physical locations, and was a study of face-to-face interactions, a web-based solicitation was inconsistent with this methodological approach. My next step was to ask staff to recommend individual clients who might be interested in being interviewed and to approach these clients initially to gain their permission to be referred to me. This approach worked slightly better in that staff referred 3 people to me, 2 of whom I was able to interview. However, asking staff to recruit potential interview participants also resulted in staff tending to select patrons whom they knew well, and/or whom they
knew were already very positive about their reference and library services. When I asked staff if they knew of any patrons who might not necessarily speak so positively, they could not easily name any individuals. Finally, since this pilot study took place over only a few weeks, staff noted that there were individuals whom they knew of, but whom they had not physically seen in the library during my period of observation. If conducting this study in future, I would consider revisiting the entire approach for soliciting client participation. I would consider dedicating specific days where I might locate myself out in some of the library spaces where clients are located and try to engage people in conversations through that means, rather than rely only on reaching those individuals who engaged with the reference desk staff.

4.7 Data analysis
There are three primary categories of data in this study: a) researcher notes from the information desk, on observed interactions including verbatim conversations with and among staff and my reflections and field notes b) transcripts of interviews with a selection of library staff and clients and c) documentary evidence of the policies, procedures and human resource policies, directing the work of the reference service from the Library administration and local branch perspectives.17

4.7.1 Coding reference interactions
Reference interaction and reference transaction are defined separately in this context. A reference transaction refers “a request for information made directly by a library user that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff” (Ontario Public library statistics, 2006); reference interaction or encounter includes any verbal or non-verbal, in-person approach to the reference or information desk by a library client. Each separate communication activity that begins and ends by mutual acknowledgement between the client and the library staff member is counted as one interaction. If the patron returns to the desk to follow-up on a previous conversation, this would be recorded as a separate interaction. Because this study focuses on the interpersonal knowledge sharing among library clients and reference staff in the library’s physical reference desk space, only face-to-face transactions were recorded through observation. Because these observations rely only on

17 The protocol used to reference data is described in Appendix 2 – Guide to data coding
my ability to hear accurately, transcribe and capture all of the words exchanged, there are inevitable errors or transcription inaccuracies. However, to the best of my ability, each transaction recorded reflects the language and all of the conversation exchanged around a particular query. Where it appears that no answer in words was recorded, it could often be the case, that the library staff member only acted and did not speak in response to the query – for example in passing pages from the printer over to the patron.

Three levels of coding and categorizing were applied to the observed information desk interactions of the Pilot Branch (PB) and Small Branch (SB). These coding levels can be characterized as 1) normative 2) descriptive and 3) formative (Vicente, 1999). Interactions were coded by location and by type of query in each level. Time of interaction was only noted by desk shift (e.g., 10:00 am to 1:00 pm) in which it occurred and gender was also noted. Researcher field notes were placed in a separate file for theoretical and methodological consideration. Notes on conversations between and among staff and myself as researcher that were not directly part of a particular interaction were also placed into a separate file for analysis.

Inter-coders were sought through a request to the Canadian Association of Public Libraries via a former public library colleague with an active membership in this organization. Two working reference librarians with more than ten years experience each, agreed to participate using a sample of 70 observed transactions from across three branches. One person was from within the province in which the study was conducted (Ontario) while the other person was from another province (Alberta). The sample transactions were selected by taking every fifth transaction from three branches until 70 were selected (sample in Appendix 9). In certain instances, some transactions were rejected and the next transaction was used, because the written notes were not clear enough without more prior contextual or local organizational knowledge. Instructions were provided asking these coders to code according to these level 1 and level 2 categories. Definitions and category descriptions were provided to both coders and two requests for clarification were received.

For the first level of coding, coders were asked to indicate whether the transaction would qualify as being a “reference transaction” according to the provincial ministry definition and guidelines. Once the coding was submitted one coder (Ontario) acknowledged that she interpreted the guidelines more broadly in one particular way: she interpreted “simple shelf checks” much more narrowly than either the other coder or myself and she acknowledged that this was her own institution’s local interpretation. This is a significant difference that points to an ongoing ambiguity and inter/intra-institutional differences in interpretation of
standard definitions. Despite these differences, I believe it is still useful to attempt to code the observed reference transactions at least in a preliminary way, using these guidelines even if 100% consistency is unrealistic. Once this difference was accounted for in each individually coded file, the difference was reduced from 14 transactions to 4 transactions. These differences were reviewed by the researcher and related to how the “primary purpose” of the transaction changes and is often re-interpreted over the course of the interaction between library staff member and their client.

The normative coding scheme is based on the current, common framework used by public libraries for “counting reference transactions.” To qualify for their portion of provincial funding, every Ontario regional and municipal library must record and annually report statistics describing their service outputs in various ways. These statistics are then tabulated and published in an annual report. Reference transactions are among the outputs counted; the instructions for data collection prescribe queries that are to be included and those kinds of queries that are to be excluded. 18 Queries to be counted or “included” are defined as follows:

*Level 1 – Normative coding*

1. Requests for help finding information on an electronic database or in the catalogue (other than simple checks of the library catalogue for a specific title)
2. Questions of fact or finding facts
3. Literature searches
4. Reader’s advisory questions
5. Requests for information and referral
6. Database searches

Queries to be “excluded” from this output measure and from level 1 coding are defined as follows:

1. Requests for directions, information on locations
2. Interlibrary loan requests
3. Questions about rules or policies
4. Requests for assistance about the use of the library and its services (i.e., library policy, procedures, services, programs, equipment and facilities)
5. Shelf checks and simple checks of the library catalogue for specific items,

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6. Advertisements, bills, personal telephone calls, public notices or solicitations received by library staff.

At the descriptive level, all interactions were coded according to both the included and excluded categories and other categories were developed if necessary so that all interactions could be described. This shift from normative to descriptive coding is important to note. The categories at this second level of coding are developed according to an analysis of the primary purpose of each interaction (i.e., each discrete communication activity that begins and ends through mutual agreement of the staff and client). In order to address the research questions posed in this study, it is important to distinguish reference transactions in the narrowest definitional or normative understanding from reference interactions in the broader sense defined here descriptively. The research questions guiding this study are addressed to the types of knowledge and knowledge processes present in the face-to-face encounters across the reference desk space of the public library and they include all activities – verbal and non-verbal interactions, transactions, and conversations in the most inclusive communication structure – and thus these interactions must be included in data collection and analysis. To ignore all of these other activities and interactions would be to bound this study as a case of the reference transaction, rather than as a case of the reference service in its larger interpersonal entirety. The descriptive level of analysis expands the normative level of analysis; this level defines all interactions as discrete communication acts and classifies them according to their primary informational subject, primary defined as that question that brought them to the desk initially and which is capture in the first question posed. At this level of coding, a comprehensive description of the interactions – accounting for all types of interactions observed, was compiled. The categories that were developed and applied are as follows:

**Level 2 – Descriptive coding**

1. Subject or information requests (includes all categories in Level 1)
2. Questions on use of technology
3. Locating specific item or simple catalogue check
4. Wayfinding or directional questions
5. Using the library system (questions on policy and procedure)
6. Social visit or chat

These categories are derived and adapted from the categories from the Ontario Ministry instructions so that I could account for all types of observed interactions.
At level 3, the formative level of coding, a thematic list of terms including broader, narrower and related concepts was constructed based on an iterative process of coding, of identifying themes and re-coding, initially by building on key terms and key concepts. These included terms such as “personal experience or tacit knowledge”, “learning”, “teaching”, “conduit style communication”, “previous knowledge”, “cultural knowledge” and “explicit knowledge”. A detailed description of this coding process and the results of this coding are discussed in the Chapter Five.

4.7.2 Coding interviews and field notes
Documentary evidence, field notes, staff conversations and interview transcripts were also coded using a similar approach. Preliminary attempts were made to code these interviews using text analysis software; however, given the relatively small amount of text generated from interviews and my experiments with the software, I chose to code the interviews manually, instead with a number of iterative cycles. Formal coding of interviews consisted of identification of narrative fragments and narrative structures such as a chronology that might be suggested by a participant’s statement, “I first started using the library when …” (Boje, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Responses to specific questions were coded with key words based on the themes already identified; key phrases and fragments were highlighted colour coding. Documents were also coded according to the participants’ frequency of use, formal status (e.g., system-wide policy) and reported knowledge of or familiarity with their contents.

An externally facilitated focus group of observed participants provided them with opportunities to validate (or not) the data analysis methods and some preliminary interpretations, through reading of a sample of observation transcripts and researcher interpretations. This focus group also gave opportunity for external evidence of the researcher’s trustworthiness to study participants.

4.8 Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Review Committee and by the library organization’s management representative. As a municipal agency, the library organization must adhere to the provincial statute governing privacy, Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, and I was therefore also required to conform to these requirements. The major
areas of concerns from the organization’s perspective included confidentiality and protection of privacy of both the staff and members of the public. The following measures were taken to minimize risk of breach of confidentiality.

All patrons and staff who were interviewed, were required to complete an Interview Consent Form (Appendix 2), prior to their interviews. Transcripts of field notes, interviews and observations were secured in a locked cupboard. Only non-attributable and non-identifying quotations have been used in the study. Interviews were professionally transcribed and confidentiality agreements were obtained; tapes were immediately erased once transcriptions were completed. Because there is a great deal of personal and local branch identifying information that could not be cut out of the transcripts, only one paper copy of these documents has been used and these copies have at all times been secured only by myself as researcher. Electronic copies of these transcripts have been secured on my personal laptop which is password protected with a backup on a storage disk also secured in my home office and password protected.

In three instances staff members approached me following their interviews and requested that specific details disclosed during the interviews not be shared. These requests were noted and changes made. In two instances, when I approached library patrons to request interviews, they expressed an initial willingness which they later withdrew in subsequent conversations.

By virtue of association and structuring of municipal public libraries, I am unable to guarantee that the particular organization being studied can remain anonymous. Moreover, the staff and public were aware of the particular branches where I was collecting data. However, I have used pseudonyms when referring to the organization, or to its local branches and staff members. The chief executive of the library was also made aware prior to participation, that by nature of their position, their anonymity could not be guaranteed and notwithstanding this limitation, they agreed to be interviewed for this study.

4.9 Researcher trustworthiness

The goodness of naturalistic research is established by the “trustworthiness and authenticity” of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.170) where the inquirer’s posture is as “passionate participant’ … facilitator of multivoice reconstruction” (p.170). Lincoln & Guba (1985) are thorough in establishing criteria for researcher trustworthiness in terms of a) credibility b) transferability c) dependability and d) confirmability. In terms of credibility, they call on the researcher to adequately represent the construction of the social world both
in terms of the process used and in terms of the representations of the community of study. A prolonged stay in the field, persistent observation, triangulation of data, the search for negative cases, the establishment of referential adequacy by setting aside a portion of the data for testing of conclusions; discussions or debriefing with peers and checks with members of the community under study – these are all means for strengthening the researcher’s credibility. Transferability and confirmability are issues that can only be addressed by others who wish to make comparisons or those who can confirm the research results by reading or reviewing the study. Dependability refers to the coherence of the internal process, demonstrated in part by an internal audit capability, and to the way the researcher accounts for changing conditions throughout the study.

I worked as a manager at URPLO and its predecessor library from 1998 to 2003. During 2003 and 2004, I worked as a casual “on-call” reference librarian; this employment was terminated in 2005. I have had extensive prior experience and knowledge of the library organization and working relationships with the senior administrative personnel; I have had extensive experience as a reference librarian in another organizational setting; and I had prior professional relationships with some of the study participants. However, as an exploratory investigation, steps have been taken to triangulate data collection and analysis such as the use of an audit file, available for review throughout the study, use of intercoders, feedback from a participant focus group, and occasional presentations and discussions with study participants as the data analysis proceeded.

I collected field notes of observed interactions using established methods. However, because of deep experience in this setting, I also recorded my subjective experiences in field notes that will provide another perspective on the observed interactions and activities at the reference desk and on overall experience of being a researcher in this setting. Efforts to expose assumptions or biases were made primarily through the use of these field notes recorded while conducting observations at the desk and in conversations with colleagues throughout the study.

In the final analysis, the contribution of this study and its findings come from readers’ beliefs in the researcher’s credibility and methodological rigour and in the readers’ abilities to understand and connect the findings and interpretations to this approach and methodology. In the subsequent two chapters I present findings based on this data analysis characterizing reference transactions as interactions and in some instances, as information relationships. The last chapter, Chapter Seven, returns readers to the provisional framework in Chapter
Three and introduces a re-interpreted conceptual framework characterizing this “case” of URPLO’s reference service as an epistemic practice.
Chapter Five

Reference transaction as reference interaction

The reference desk is the place where library clients are directed to ask and receive assistance with their information questions. In this chapter I inductively construct an analysis of my observations of the reference service at the three branch library information desks. Using the coding and data analysis techniques described in the previous chapter, I categorize the reference interactions or encounters in three distinct stages which I characterize as normative, descriptive and formative. I conclude this chapter with a preliminary discussion of this analysis. To set the reader in context three narrative snapshots of the branches being studied are presented. Their purpose is to provide an introduction to these library places and spaces, to describe some of the distinctive aspects of their local organizational cultures and to give an overview of the main aspects of reference service that are both similar and unique across the three libraries. These snapshots weave together data elements including observations, interviews and documents provided to me by various departments at the library. As noted in the previous chapter, all names have been changed and in some cases personal details altered to protect the identities of the individuals.

5.1 SB branch is cozy, crowded but always familiar

I arrive at the library branch just before the start time of my first 3 hour shift. I will do two shifts today – from 10 to 1 pm and then from 2 to 5 pm. I have scheduled my shifts according to the branch’s open hours. So I knock on the front door which is still locked and the circulation staff member comes to let me in. “Morning, dear,” she says with her usual smile, “How are we today? Going to be another hot one, I think,” referring to the weather and not to library business. Susan has been at the branch part-time for more than 20 years, she knows most patrons by their first and second names, she knows the staff and she is both a friend and motherly personality at this location. Her co-worker, Jane, with a similar status, also has as many years here and they clearly know how to work well together in this very small space, standing at the two terminals, handling material, going back and forth to the shelves and the shipping bins. Most of the permanent staff have been at this location for many years or at least for all of their time employed by the library. While each staff member
has their own responsibilities, everyone pitches in. Evidence of job segregation and/or organizational hierarchy is hardly visible.

This is my third week at this location and I have come to be a recognized and accepted member of the team whenever I’m at the branch. I have a place to put my personal bags, I unpack my laptop, put on my nametag and set up my chair at the information desk. Someone has brought in home-made squares, and a few remaining chocolates from yesterday are still on the dish in the back office. Meanwhile, the staff are busy getting ready to open the branch: bins are being unloaded, books, cds and dvds are being checked in, computers turned on, the page is shelving books, staff are having coffee and catching up on news, both personal and work-related. It’s a cliché but nevertheless, in my time here, it’s true that this branch runs like a finely-honed production site of some kind, perhaps a day-time television show. The last summer reading event will be held this morning which means that the place will be filled with kids, babies and parents needing a break from the pace of summer holidays. I check in with Marlene at the reference desk asking if anything is new since I was last here and what kind of day she expects it be at the desk. The doors open and SB is officially open for business.

A couple of the regulars head directly to the public internet terminals. They will spend the morning here. Mr. Smith of course, is among them. I’ve been trying to catch his eye since my first week here, to see if he will acknowledge me and then I would think about asking if I could interview him. But he never wants to see me, really. A mother comes in with her children, and stops to talk to Andrea, who comes around the information desk and squats down to visit with the small kids. She and the mother exchange news about the day, about the summer, about not having much time to read their own books, and about their upcoming move to another city, and another library.

Meanwhile a steady stream of older patrons comes in to drop off books, pick up items from the hold shelf, review the DVDs which are on the ledge immediately in front of the information desk. The reference staff member sees someone checking out a particular book – she stands and moves over to chat for a moment about this book, about how much she likes that author, and asking the patron if she too has read any of the other books by this author. A classic reader’s advisory kind of conversation. Entirely unstructured, and spontaneous.

Personal talk is intermingled with book talk, first names and family members are referenced. Not the way with all of the patrons, but with a majority of people coming in the door. Everyone gets eye contact and greeted by their name, by the circulation staff, “Hi Mr.
Jones, how are you today?” or “Morning, Mrs. Wilson”. In a way, there isn’t enough space not to see everyone. Sometimes the patrons acknowledge the greeting; sometimes they don’t. I’ve seen Mr. Smith every day I’ve been in and I’ve heard him acknowledged by the staff most of those days, and yet he has never answered. I’ve never heard his voice! But I feel already like I recognize him a bit. One staff member notes that the way the desk is positioned she thinks many patrons often think the desk is the “reception” desk and therefore they walk all the way down the counter to this spot to ask a question that is in fact, circulation related. It’s a point of some frustration, but everyone acknowledges that the space is very small here. The telephone rings regularly, and calls are transferred to “information, line 2, please.”

Similarly, patrons are sent down the counter by the circulation person to “talk to the information staff and they’ll help you.” An adult male patron comes to the desk and stands silently, waiting to catch Andrea’s eye. She turns behind and takes the Globe and Mail book section from the shelf and hands it to the patron, who nods and goes off to take a seat. Fifteen minutes later, he returns and passes the newspaper back to the staff member, and says, a quiet “thanks.” When I ask what that’s about, she explains that the book section of the Saturday newspaper was regularly being “stolen”. And this patron “kept coming in to ask for it and he could never find it and it kept disappearing so we started keeping it behind the desk for him.”

A female patron approaches the desk with a list of requests – she has 3 items she asks the librarian to look up in the catalogue. Librarian looks up each one and places requests with her library card. Very straightforward transactions. Patron says, “And now do you have Bel Canto in paperback?” Librarian: “No, we just have a hard-cover copy.” Patron: “I could take that.” Librarian: “I’ll get that for you – it’s a hardcover regular three week book.” (SB27)

This is a typical reference encounter at this branch – patrons coming to the desk looking for items, and asking assistance from the reference staff to place holds, locate items on the catalogue, finding out how to transfer a request from one branch to another, how to place hold on an item at the newest library branch.

There is only one staff member on the information desk at any one time; altogether five staff work there regularly and occasionally relief staff cover for holidays and other absences. In the course of one day, however, the desk staff rotates to cover programs, coffee breaks, lunch breaks and opportunities to do “off-desk” work. Only in exceptional instances, is the information desk left un-staffed. As a small branch, SB can make use of its size to have more flexibility in how the desks are staffed and scheduled. When something needs to happen, such as a window display being changed or a small backlog of work
having been built up, the staff negotiate desk coverage with each other with what seems like the smoothest ease. When I ask how it is that everything runs so smoothly here, the answer coming consistently from each person echoes this statement: “it’s just too small a place not to get along” and “we’ve all worked together for a long time, we’re more than just co-workers, we care about each other’s lives” (SBLIN#1). During the course of my days at SB, I am also drawn into the work of the team and to the activities of their community. Regular patrons come to say hello to me, having seen me over the course of a few weeks; staff include me in the chit-chat; and they include me in their information work at the desk by inviting me into particular reference conversations. They ask me about my work, and they talk about their work more generally. Distinctions by function, by position, by informal expertise or prior knowledge, by job title are all known and practiced, and I am occasionally treated as a trusted confidante hearing carefully expressed, individual dissatisfactions with some organizational practices and structures affecting their work.

5.2 MB branch follows the cycles of families

I come in by the back door which is left open until the front doors open at 10 a.m. MB is a larger branch, its own older building, in a well-established neighbourhood. Among other characterizations, staff refer to MB as a “literary branch,” meaning that more of the library patrons read literary versus pulp fiction. To an experienced reference librarian, this distinction is informative and can help define the types of questions asked at the desk and thus the expertise a manager might look for in her front-line reference staff. Whereas the adult reference desk has a prime location on the main floor, the children’s department is in
the basement, a not uncommon location, but much to the perpetual chagrin of the veteran children’s assistant, Pam. “Yes, we’re used to it really, but it would be nice to see sunshine, sometimes.”

Pam and others characterize the ebb and flow of traffic and branch activity by saying that business “follow the cycles of families.” Pam works on the adult desk occasionally – having worked in the children’s department for more than 20 years, and raising her own family of four children, she has come to know many of the patrons and their children personally over the years. She smiles and greets people when filling in at the adult desk almost all individually by name or at least by visual recognition. I see how Pam and her co-worker from children’s (also of many years) are just a little different than the newer adult reference staff in initiating their “hi” or “how are you today?” greetings. As if they actually knew how this particular individual “was” yesterday, in fact! A subtle, but consistently noticeable difference. The circulation supervisor nods at me from across the main floor as I unpack my computer; by the time I finish my observations here, she is asking after my children and she includes me in her regular Tim Hortons coffee runs. I see Jan, my most frequent reference desk partner, coming by and I greet her. I can hear by his voice in the stacks that Tim, the on-site branch coordinator and desk backup, is also in.

Despite its larger size, this branch also only has a one-person reference desk but unlike SB, most of the staff who work on the adult desk are librarians (versus the other category of desk staff, public service assistants) including the coordinator, and the children’s staff. Decisions around staffing levels of reference desks appear to be local ones, that is, made by the branch manager and these differences across branches in the context of a recently implemented job evaluation program, have been the subject of some concern and informal discussion by some of the front-line librarians who feel their professionalism and expertise is being de-valued. I have been privy to some of these comments and invited into occasional conversations on this topic through the course of my study and visits across locations.

MB was under threat of closure in 2004 and since that time when the decision was made to keep the branch open, the manager reports, that “circulation has been on an upward swing.” Jan, the newest adult librarian to this branch, joins me on the desk after checking on the public internet machines and catalogue workstations. She turns on her machine and arranges papers and tools on the desk in preparation for the doors to open. Pointing to a tattered 5 x 7” piece of paper taped to the reference staff computer monitor, she comments that maybe it is time to remove this because it is shabby looking and has
been there for quite a while. The paper (illustrated in Figure 5-3 below) is titled *Reference & Information Service Model Reference Behaviors Checklists* and reminds staff of positive reference behaviors such as "speaks in interested helpful tone," "is mobile and goes with patron," or "gives friendly verbal greeting." An unmistakable similarity to the kind of instructions provided in any number of retail customer service training manuals. When I ask for the background on why this is there, she smiles and tells me that the branch supervisor is “very keen on customer service” and it has been his decision to keep this reminder which comes from the system-wide policy guidelines document, *Reference and Information Services Guidelines (RISG)* (see Appendix X) clearly visible for whoever works at this desk. “But I think we’ve all got it by now, and we can always do with a little less clutter around here.” The doors open and the business of reference begins.

Figure 5-2

Facing the MB reference desk
A stream of adults pushing babies and pre-schoolers in sporty multiple seat strollers comes in first, followed by single adults who obviously know exactly why they are here and which area of the library they want to get to. The average family income of residents in this branch area is $122,966 according to the 2001 census, much higher than the municipal average of $86,126. Many of the strollers get parked across from the reference desk because the elevator is small and located at the far end of the building. Mothers, fathers and caregivers stop by the adult reference desk which is located directly across from the stairs with lots of open space around it and in clear eye-sight of the main service areas of the branch.

A woman approaches the desk, looks at me, smiles and then says to Jan, “got some extra help, today?” I introduce myself and my study and Tracey introduces herself, then gives me her 2-minute ‘elevator speech’ on why this branch and these people are so “great.” My presence at each of the desks elicits this kind of initial reaction to greater or lesser degrees – despite all assurances to the contrary, the most regular patrons seem to feel that I’m there to assess how well the staff are doing their job. And they then feel completely at ease in giving their opinion – always very positive – about how important these people and

Figure 5-3
Model Reference Behaviors Checklist
Taped to the computer monitor at MB reference desk
this branch are to their daily lives. “I always need an extra five minutes to catch up with you guys before I pick up my books,” she explains, as if she needs to explain her behavior. The “computer lady” whom I will meet in person is already at her regular internet computer where she will stay until at least noon. Every weekday, the same machine, unless she’s away or sick, I’m told by the librarian. Another patron on her way to the stacks, from a few meters away catches Jan’s eye and announces clearly, with emphasis on the first syllable, “unassisted.” Jan smiles and says, “great.” She explains, “I taught her to use the computer and to set up an e-mail account and this is the first time she’s done it without my help.”

From this reference desk, the reference librarian often engages in one-on-one instruction as the process for assisting the patron in answering their question. Looking over the librarian’s shoulder to her computer screen is a common practice, made easier by the space available around the desk. Instruction also occurs at the public online catalogues near the desk about how to understand the library catalogue, or about using computers, or using application software such as Word or Excel.

In her orientation briefing for an upcoming visit by the Chief Librarian, the manager summarizes, “[MB] is a branch that is busy throughout the day as we have university students, retired users as well as caregivers with young children, a lunch crowd from [the elementary school] and an after school crowd. Evenings are filled with the people who have worked all day as well parents coming in with school age children and students working on assignments. Seniors and young people are also heavy users, and the public computers are in high demand.” We might ask how this description differs from any other urban public library and perhaps it doesn’t. However, I know that I saw all of these types of clients coming to the reference desk during my period of observation here, with as many similar but uniquely individual needs for interaction with the staff and further, I know that MB is its own distinctive place from the perspectives of the staff and clients who inhabit it.

5.3 LB branch offers specializations for everyone

Among the local cultural communities, the media and even economic developers, LB is often described as an inefficient, now grossly under-sized main library with a brutalist architecture that has also come to characterize its distinct lack of service-oriented functionality, and hardly befitting the needs of a major Canadian city. Born as a Carnegie library and located in the heart of the city’s knowledge workers and their grid of office towers, LB traded its gothic sensibility for this modernist style in the early 1970s. Today it is a 3-storey building that houses all of the library system’s special collections and related services in addition to
housing the largest circulating and reference collections. Some of the URPLO staff from SB, for example, have never been inside the LB branch, and for them, this branch is in mythological terms, something akin to the organization’s own post-modern, all-seeing, bureaucratic behemoth. Despite what the service model\textsuperscript{19} indicates, most library staff can sense that this branch is in a league of its own, as the administrative headquarters and the city’s central library. LB is the branch where the best and worst library news stories originate such as, “aide in hot water over bathroom cleanup” or “library card really a credit card for knowledge.” And it is where the system’s official Reference Department is located with the most extensive collections, specially trained staff and comprehensive reference services. Small business owners, researchers, and students are often directed to this location first.

Figure 5-4 URPLO’s LB branch from the street view

To work around the architectural and technological restrictions, LB has three reference desks, one on each floor and each is carefully differentiated from the others by their departmental names and collection areas: Main Adult & Readers’ advisory – first floor, Main Adult Non-fiction – second floor and Main Reference - third floor. The first floor desk is

\textsuperscript{19} URPLO’s service delivery framework defines service levels according to type / size of library. There are 5 levels from smallest to largest assigned primarily by building size and population area served: Community Levels 1, 2, and 3, District and Central libraries. Branches in Community Level 1 are in rural areas of the municipality; other branches are in the suburban and urban areas of the municipality. SB is a Community Level 2, MB and PB are designated Community Level 1 and LB is in the Central library category.
referred to as a directional, greeting desk and it provides access to the fiction and audiovisual collections; the second floor desk provides information service from the circulating non-fiction collections and the third floor reference desk provides in-depth access to government information, newspapers and periodicals, inter-library loan and outreach, archives and local history, and other specialized information resources. Internet access is available on all levels. An escalator goes up from the ground level to the second and third floors, but as heard frequently by the staff at the second floor reference staff, “and in case you’re confused, there is no down escalator, just the stairs.”

Typically all desks at LB are always staffed by teams of two or more people. Librarians and assistants work on the first floor, adult librarians work at the second floor information desk, and reference librarians work at the third floor reference desk. The first and second floor information staff report to the Manager of Adult and Readers’ Advisory Services, while the third floor reference staff report to the Manager of Reference Services. It is impossible not to associate this service layout with a notion of organizational and service hierarchy. The service approach is formally designated a triage system whereby patrons with complex information questions are referred to the staff on the second and third floors, depending on the type of question, either in person or via any of the other modes of information service – telephone, e-mail, or virtual IM chat services.

Members of my study advisory committee and the committee of middle managers recommend that I conduct observations at both of these LB desks and not at the specialty Reference Department desk, principally because of the high traffic and because they felt there was a wider range of questions posed at these service points. Since my study goal is to observe the reference service in the public library, I conduct my observations at LB only at the first and second floor adult information desks to gain as much exposure to the organization’s typical system-wide reference practices as possible, meeting all of site selection goals of working in typical, accessible and high traffic sites.

On my first day at LB, as became my typical behavior, I split my day between the first and second floor desks, alternating morning and afternoon and/or afternoon and evening at these desks. And just as I am welcomed at SB and MB, Suzanne, the adult department supervisor at LB, is also present to welcome me and to show me my temporary locker in the staff work room where I can store my personal articles for the duration of my observations. Security of personal and library property are habitual worries here. LB is a branch I am most familiar with because I had previously worked in a technical services department adjacent to these public areas until 2001 and I still recognize a few familiar faces from that previous
Early into my morning shift, one of the librarians, Pauline, arrives to provide backup for the morning coffee break. It seems to be an unofficial policy on the second floor that colleagues are assigned to cover for breaks, and lunch periods, because of the higher traffic. Another significant difference in how the three branches approach their reference desk staffing, is that the librarians at LB have between 25 and 50% of their time scheduled “off desk” whereas SB and LB staff are officially scheduled on the desk for 100% of their time. An ongoing difference (some call it an inequity) about which these librarians are acutely sensitive because over my period of observation I hear small references to this difference in all of the branches and only from the librarian members of the staff groups.

Coming back from helping a patron in the stacks, Pauline gestures to me to follow her back into the corner area of the second floor, near the 640’s. “I want to show you something, which is part of how it’s different here from any other location in the system.” She continues, “We often have to do this and it’s certainly not official ‘reference’ work.” She comes to a shelf area where someone is lying on the floor between two shelves with a large duffel bag as his pillow. Without any exchange of words, the clearly disoriented patron slowly stands up, gathers his belongings and shuffles down the aisle towards the reading chairs. “He knows he’s not allowed to block the aisles, we get complaints, so now I don’t even have to say anything, I just have to come and stand and he leaves.” We return to the desk, and the other librarian, Susan, looks up at me and says, “You’ve worked here before, you know about the dailies?” They are referring of course, to the common practice of many of the city’s downtown homeless people to use the library as their daytime sanctuary. “I always think it’s a privilege to work with the indigent.” Despite her verbal affirmation, Susan and also Pauline both suggest implicitly, that they have more mixed opinions about having to ‘manage’ the branch’s public spaces in these ways.

LB gets much more traffic than at either of the other branches, including many more people at the information desks. As one of the few free, public internet access points in the downtown core, however, this might not be too surprising. There are more than 40 public internet computers distributed over three floors at LB and at the first floor desk, particularly, the information staff are frequently answering the “how can I use the internet?” question. It is also easy to see that LB attracts many more adults for whom neither English nor French is their first language. Knowledge workers are another identifiable cluster of users; they infer this identification when they begin their interaction, for example with “I’m on my lunch, I don’t have much time, but do you have any information on [a subject] …?”
Just as occurred at the other study sites, by about mid-point of my observation period, there is the slightest change in atmosphere at these desks. The staff on both the first and second floor desks brought me into their interactions more frequently without first asking my permission to be “interrupted.” Although no one ever forgets my role, they do come to frequently involve me in their work by asking my assistance in answering questions, by inviting me into their in-between patron conversations and by asking me about my work and what I am seeing. With the largest concentration of reference staff of any of the branches and being in such close proximity to the Library organization’s administrative offices, my observations at this branch include many more conversations recorded in the form of field notes on all aspects of reference desk work. I meet the city librarian and a handful of the library’s managers in the stairwells, or at shift changes, at the beginning and end of their business days. The fact that I previously worked more closely with a handful of these staff members also contributes to this greater engagement with me. These field notes are discussed more fully in Chapter Six.

The following discussions on the reference transaction and reference interaction must be read with appreciation for this social and phenomenological context just described. These narrative accounts capture a fictional day in the life of SB, MB, and LB during my time there as a participant researcher. It would be irresponsible as an ethnographic researcher not to set the reader in the world in which I worked. There are many more fine details and events that occur in the real life world of these reference services in branches and these events will be discussed as they are significant in the larger descriptive and interpretative views of this study.

Each of these branch libraries has its own distinctive sub-culture and identity that distinguishes it from any other branch in the URPLO system. I have alluded to a number of factors that inform these distinctions including branch size and building design, linguistic, demographic and socio-economic profile of their respective communities, branch history, contributions of individual staff members, branch leadership and management style, and proportion of librarians and library assistants on the desk. However, notwithstanding these differences, these branches share similarities which have been discussed in Chapter Four, section 4.3 Selection of research sites, making it possible to now make some comparisons in the data analysis and interpretation.
5.4 The reference encounter as transaction

From a qualitative and ethnographic methodological perspective, it might appear incongruous to begin data analysis with a quantitative summary. In addressing the following research questions, one of my tasks is to identify and understand the types of knowledge and knowledge sharing processes at work in the reference practice.

Q1: What types of knowledge are created, shared and used by library staff and their clients in the provision of reference service, in an urban public library branch?

Q2: What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients’ reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?20

Beginning data analysis of the reference transaction requires beginning with simple, descriptive statistics. My purpose is to describe the reference transactions at their simplest, subject and informational point. Thus, I begin with this approach to the data, but it is merely an initial step towards a larger inductive analysis of the reference desk service as a social, knowledge sharing activity. None of my data analysis involves evaluation of librarian responses or of users’ satisfactions. This is a study about face-to-face, information and knowledge sharing, sensemaking and the role of cultural knowledge in the library’s reference desk service – a study asking what and how questions about social-informational interactions, rather than a study asking how or how well individual reference questions are answered by the staff.

Categorizing and describing the frequency of the observed reference transactions according to the provincial and national standards is the first step because this is one of the primary ways reference services are described or reported to their municipal funders and decision-makers. While this measure itself has little real intrinsic value, output measures have long been recognized as one interpretative means of measuring, evaluating and reporting on library services; they are interpreted as “feel good” measures since they express how much the library is being used (Matthews, 2004, p. 83). As Matthews further explains, “implicit in the use of output measures … is that the[ir] beneficial effects are also increasing” (p.83). While not sufficient by themselves as evaluative performance measures because they do not address user satisfaction or service effectiveness, frequency counts remain one of the central measures of public library activity. The core activities of public

20 Refer to Chapter Three for a clarification of the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘information’ as they are being used and interpreted in this study.
libraries – circulating materials and providing access to information and programming – are particularly well-suited to measurement based on frequency, a method that remains limited by its inability to capture the meanings embedded in the interactions.

Categorization of reference desk queries and answers according to the types of questions asked and answered has also been one of the main ways reference desk services have been studied by researchers. These categorizations can be used as part of research exploring users information needs (“What questions are users asking?”) or exploring librarians’ reference behaviours (“How and how well are library staff answering users’ questions?”). Other areas of research and study of reference services relate to the evaluation of the reference staff’s communication and information behaviours, including their methods for resolving and/or responses to patrons’ information queries. Studies on perceptions of user satisfaction with their interactions with the reference staff are included in the latter cluster of research (Saxton & Richardson, 2002).

A secondary reason for beginning my analysis with descriptive statistics is that in the course of my data collection and in regular discussions with practitioners both from URPLO and in other professional conversations, one of the most common questions I often received was “What kinds of questions are being asked at the reference desk these days?” Implied in this question, is a related question, “Have the types of questions changed because of the Internet?” The language or discourse reference librarians have for discussing the types of questions being asked, comes in large part from the common types of categorizations used in the reference literature, and/or used in regular surveys of such services. For example, in the public library context, we might ask if there were many readers’ advisory questions, or directional questions, or information questions or catalogue questions or school assignment questions, etc.

Another important qualification regarding the following discussion on my study findings is that as participant observer attempting to record verbatim as much as possible the reference interactions at the desk, I cannot guarantee 100% accuracy in achieving that objective. Busy desks, multiple types of verbal, auditory, and visual interruptions, not being able to hear all of the words exchanged, having the reference encounter move away from the desk to the collection areas: these are principal explanations for my making this qualifying comment. However, to the best of my ability, I record complete encounters as I hear and see them. Incomplete encounters are not counted among the 480 encounters reported. However, I also deliberately take greater efforts to record all of the activities taking place, than to record only completed encounters. Thus while fragments of reference
encounters are not represented in the quantitative analysis, these fragments are included as observational notes and are included in broader discussions of findings including level three qualitative analysis.

Before coding of my observations of reference desk interactions, I initially reviewed all interactions using the Government of Ontario’s definitions and guidelines for counting reference transactions as described in Chapter 4, section 4.6. Inter-coders were also used for levels 1 and 2 coding as noted in section 4.6.4. Notwithstanding inter/intra-institutional differences in how the standard or provincially stipulated definitions of reference transactions are applied, it is a useful first step from a general descriptive perspective to analyze the principal topic of each interaction.

By coding the transactions in this way, I provide a basic and simplistic description of the reference questions and answers I observed. Similar definitions of reference transactions are used internationally and are also used in the research literatures to define and study the reference interview from an LIS perspective. Reference statistics or information questions are also widely reported by library organizations and are compared among and within libraries to identify trends or changes in usage patterns. With the introduction of electronic reference services via e-mail and chat-based services, libraries have begun to monitor how clients may be shifting their use from in-person to virtual reference services. And in addition, with the rich and increasingly accessible information resources available on the internet, many libraries are also monitoring the impact on their common output measures notably number of items borrowed or circulated, and number of reference questions answered. Frequency statistics such as those gathered provincially and nationally using these standard definitions have created opportunities for comparison and even rankings across library systems (Canadian public library statistics, 2006). Implied in these rankings is that increasing or higher frequencies are desirable.

I begin by coding these observed reference transactions as if I am counting reference questions according to the normative definitions from these provincial and national

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21 The American Library Association provides definitions from three related organizations including the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). All are very similar and build on this core definition: “Reference transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements.” This definition from RUSA was revised in January 2008 and introduced the word “consultation” to replace the word “contact” in the previous definition.

http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/protools/referenceguide/definitionsreference.cfm
surveys. I refer to this coding as Level One normative coding. Transactions to be counted are *subject-based or information queries* that fall into one of these categories: 1) requests for help finding information on an electronic database or in the catalogue (other than simple checks of the library catalogue for a specific title); 2) questions of fact or finding facts; 3) literature searches; 4) reader’s advisory questions; 5) requests for information and referral; and 6) database searches. Statistical tests for significance were not conducted with these data because there were too few incidents in a number of categories.

As shown in Table 5-1 – *Transactions coded – Level One by library branch (3)* under the first coding category, “subject and information queries,” fewer than one-third of all queries in each branch fits the standard or normative definition of a reference transaction: 20.1% of observed reference transactions in LB meet the normative or standard definition; 17.4% of observed reference transactions in MB meet the normative or standard definition; and 30.9% of observed reference transactions in SB meet the normative or standard definition. Overall, only 21% of all observed reference interactions would be officially recognized as answering reference questions, the primary business of information desks. It is somewhat surprising that the smallest branch had the highest number of official subject-information reference transactions, whereas we might expect this highest proportion of such questions at the largest branch, with the highest number of staff members performing reference service and with the largest collections.

To account for all of the observed reference transactions beyond the normative “subject and information queries,” I develop six categories based on the main subject of the transaction, modifying and adapting both the included and excluded categories provided in the provincial and national guidelines in these ways. I describe this activity as Level Two – descriptive coding of reference transactions, which I will now name as reference *interactions* as they do not meet the narrow and technical definition of reference *transaction* presented earlier in the literature review and in the description of the methodology. The primary reason it is important to descriptively code all discrete interactions or communication activities between the reference staff and clients, regardless of whether or not they can be technically defined as reference questions, is to provide a means of acknowledging these activities formally. This study focuses on knowledge and learning processes and types of knowledge interactions that occur at the boundary of the public library’s reference service and its community. The coding results using these expanded categories are presented in Table 5-2 *Transactions coded - Level Two by library branch (3).* I establish categories for “policy and procedure,” “technology” and “way-finding” or “directional” all of which are similar to the
categories or types of questions to be excluded in any formal counting. Similarly I re-name the category for “simple catalogue checks” as “locate item” which purpose is to locate individual items from the collection and which is also excluded according to these standards. I add one additional category which is not noted anywhere in the prescribed instructions or standards, “social chat”, because I observe reference interactions where this appears to be the sole purpose, as observed or as stated by the patron “just stopping by to say hi.” Table 5-2 reports the frequency of observed interactions according to these elaborated categories by individual branch.

The major difference then between these two tables of data is that only one category of transaction (subject and information) can be officially counted as a reference transaction according to provincial and other governing standards as highlighted in Table 5-1. Table 5-2 captures this approved “subject and information” category as well as five other categories of interaction. The distribution across branch and by type of interaction for all categories is further represented in a bar graph in Figure 5-5 Level Two Coding – Percentage Distribution of Reference Transactions by Category and Branch.

Figure 5-5 Level Two Coding - % Distribution of reference interactions by category and branch graphically illustrates the main subject of all 480 observed interactions. LB has a significantly higher percentage of way-finding transactions (15.1%) compared to both MB (2.0%) and SB (1.4%). As a large multi-level branch with 3 separate reference and information desks, these figures may not be unexpected. The fact that MB has the highest percentage of locate items transactions (43.6 %) or 65 transactions compared with 77 transactions (29.7 %) over the same number of hours at LB, is also notable. There are a number of possible reasons for this difference. As a popular and medium-sized branch in a well established and highly educated community close to one of the universities, these patrons may be more inclined to ask for assistance in locating items where patrons with similar information needs may simply bypass the reference desk at LB or SB. MB also has many library users who participate in book clubs and in such situations, these patrons usually need specific titles, at specific times. Questions that might be presented by clients as a subject-based reader’s advisory question in another location such as SB are presented as known item queries by book club readers.
Table 5-1 - Interactions coded - Level One by library branch (3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provincial standard</th>
<th>Types of questions</th>
<th>LB (n=259)</th>
<th>MB (n=149)</th>
<th>SB (n=72)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td># obs</td>
<td>% of total</td>
<td># obs</td>
<td>% of total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Subject &amp; information</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Locate item</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Policy &amp; procedure</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Social chat</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Wayfinding</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total | 259 | 100.0 | 149 | 100.0 | 72 | 100.0 | 480 | 100.0 |

Table 5-2 - Interactions coded - Level Two by library branch (3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All transactions</th>
<th>Types of questions</th>
<th>LB (n=259)</th>
<th>MB (n=149)</th>
<th>SB (n=72)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td># obs</td>
<td>% of total</td>
<td># obs</td>
<td>% of total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Subject &amp; information</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Locate item</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Policy &amp; procedure</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Social chat</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Wayfinding</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total | 259 | 100.0 | 149 | 100.0 | 72 | 100.0 | 480 | 100.0 |

Figure 5-5: Level Two Coding – % Distribution of Reference Interactions by Category & Branch

Despite the presence of some common challenges which arise in coding any reference transactions (which are documented widely in reference services research and
literatures such as Richardson & Saxton, 2005; Ross et al, 2002), categorizing these interactions tells us in broad strokes, very simply what people want and more precisely, what they say they want when they approach the public library reference staff and then we can find out how they manage to satisfy their information problem with the assistance of the library staff. However, this descriptive analysis is insufficient in providing understandings about the interactions between staff and their patrons that cannot be categorized in these ways. If these measures were sufficient, we would leave these sites knowing very little more about the sensemaking and knowledge sharing practices or about what ways explicit, tacit or experiential and cultural knowledge are present in these encounters. Further, if we were to focus only on “informational” questions according to the standard definitions, we would be ignoring large portions of reference desk service and activities, measuring only what these “standards” tell us to see at the desk. Describing all desk interactions by incorporating “excluded” categories into the analysis already begins to recognize all of the staff-client reference encounters, that is, all of the human to human problem mediation that occurs at these service points, not just a portion that fits a longstanding but limited definition. The distinction is important and shifting our focus requires a sharp perspectival shift: from seeing and valuing what is defined by a professional and legislated policy statement to seeing and valuing what occurs and creating the policy statement to describe all of these realities including what is already defined by the professional practice.

5.5 The reference encounter as interaction

In the third stage of analysis of these encounters or observations at SB/MB/LB, my primary objective is to understand more about if and how these reference desk encounters might illustrate evidence of the tacit, explicit and cultural knowledge as posed by research question #2. A related objective is to address research question #1 by finding some way to account for all of the observations, recognizing both their variety and their scope from a knowledge creation and sharing perspective. Data analysis at this stage is formative; I follow the structure described by Miles and Huberman (1994, p.92) as “the ladder of analytical abstraction” (p. 92) which consists of these main iterative tasks: a) creating a text to work on; b) trying out coding categories to find a set that fits; c) identifying themes and trends in the data overall; d) testing hypotheses and reducing the bulk of the data for analysis of trends in it; e) delineating the deep structure.

Unlike coding at Levels One and Two, Level Three coding is highly qualitative and in addition to using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) “ladder of analytical abstraction,” I also take
a further macro-narrative approach to the analysis of these encounters (Czarniaskwa, 2004). Each reference encounter is available as its own discrete “emplotted narrative” or story with characters (patron and staff), its own event (information problem) and its own chronology (resolution of the query) discovered through finding the interpretive theme that subsumes the events and that links these events into a meaningful sequence. In this study the meaningful sequence is the reference desk as a social and informational practice (Ryan 1993, p.141 in Czarniawska, 2004, p.23). My act of recording observations becomes the act of narrativizing the conversations whereby I adopt a narrator’s voice, applying my researcher’s filter of recording these narratives and further describing patron-staff non-verbal actions. I add to the structure of the encounter by textualizing observed non-verbal behaviours and my interpretations of what I see. For example, I note that “the patron left the desk” or “the patron seemed surprised” or “smiles were exchanged.”

I review all of the encounters at all locations, as one sample initially, to see if and how evidence of knowledge and information sharing, communication and learning between the library staff member and the reference client may or may not be present. In this sense, Level Three coding moves the analysis from a descriptive subject-based categorization to the formation of more complete understandings of all of the knowledge and information sharing dimensions of these encounters, individually and collectively. The most common research approach to studying reference observations has been to examine each “transaction” individually and then to aggregate these units based on their individual categorization (Ross et al, 2002; Saxton & Richardson, 2002). My approach here departs slightly from this traditional type of analysis. I study all encounters individually and collectively many times, but while moving back and forth inductively from data to analysis, to capture the larger patterns I see emerging and which address the study’s research questions, I focus more attention on the group of observed encounters. In this sense, the whole is more meaningful than the sum of the parts.

Rather than simply reflecting on the subject of the encounters, I examine each observation from the perspectives of knowledge and information sharing, interpersonal communication and organizational culture and any inter-relationships that might be taking place within each encounter. Using the subject categories from Level Two as my starting point, I review all reference encounters multiple times, and I present the following coding dimensions illustrated in **Figure 5-6: Dimensions of reference encounters** as a synthesis of these iterative analyses. While I treat each set of branch encounters separately in previous levels of analysis, in this analysis, I deliberately examine all observations together first. The
The unit of analysis is the reference encounter. Similarities and differences among branches are reported if they are relevant in each of the three perspectives.

The reference narrative is understood as the resolution of an information problem that the client brings to the desk; through a mutual exchange of information between the reference staff and their client, this problem becomes resolved in some way. Figure 5-6 characterizes the two primary qualitative dimensions or ways of understanding the reference interaction from knowledge and learning perspectives: a) as an information exchange and b) as an interpersonal communication. Along each of these dimensions I introduce categories where these dimensions are observed as higher or lower manifestations. I name these categories as types of reference encounters and they are: transactional, systematic, interactional and social. Through narrative deconstructions of sample observations, I describe the qualities of each of these categories from both the information exchange dimension and the interpersonal communication dimension. These dimensions are informed by the cultural and organizational setting of the library as institution. Using illustrative interactions from the data set, I explain what each of these dimensions means in a reference encounter and then I explain the four categories I have derived along these axes. Finally, I report how cultural and organizational knowledge is present either implicitly or explicitly in these sample encounters.
The reference encounter as information exchange

The reference encounter has most often been discussed and defined primarily as an informational encounter (ALA, 2007). At URPLO branch libraries, the reference service is also commonly referred to as the information desk. As explained in Chapter Three, within the LIS field, we understand a reference encounter to be a request for information that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff. In this request for information, not only does the librarian answer the query with information of some kind, but what can often be overlooked is that the client also provides information to the librarian when they introduce their query or information gap. In this way, the basic structure of a reference encounter is an information exchange even in its simplest form (Ross et al., 2002).

I observe many superficially simple requests such as these ones at each branch: “Patron - I’m looking for mathematics for about grade 8. Librarian - OK, I’ll take you here and show you what we have” (SB19). Often the type of information being sought is related to the format and availability of the particular item such as,

Patron - Excuse me there is one more thing I wanted to ask you – the video Barclay Squared – can you tell me how many videos are in the series? Librarian: I’m not coming up with that title. Patron - Oh, let me go and get the one I’ve already got. Librarian - There are five videos in the set. Patron - Oh good, I just wanted to know if this was the last one. (MB51)

Patron - Excuse me, why is there a letter with this number? Librarian - That’s part of the cutter that tells you the first letter of the author’s last name. (LB86)

In each of these encounters information is being sought and exchanged, both explicitly and implicitly. The exchange process also implies use of various types of knowledge. In SB19, the information the patron is giving in order to receive a response in return is ambiguous and without further verbal clarification, remains more unresolved. If we are to follow even at a minimum, only what the patron says, (rather than intuiting what the patron means), then we would say the patron is telling the librarian that she does not know where “mathematics” is, in the library. In the context of a reference encounter that is taking place, face-to-face in a library, the librarian might bring her experience of these types of articulations into her response and she might interpret the patron’s information as meaning, “I don’t know which section or on which shelves or on which computer I could find library materials or information on the subject of mathematics for grade 8” where “grade 8” could mean a reading level or a content level or both and where “mathematics” could mean any number of narrower, broader or related topics. Bringing her prior experience to this question, the librarian might also believe or think she knows that the adult patron really means they want information for their
student-child in grade 8 because the librarian has already answered precisely this question many times previously at this information desk, where that was the eventual outcome of the question. The patron might also be giving the librarian the information that “I know what grade 8 mathematics looks like” but this could only be implied by the way the patron presents her information need to the staff member (Ross et al., 2002).

In MB51 the patron is telling the librarian that he wants to view the entire video series, and indirectly he says that he has close by, the final video (v.5). The librarian is giving the patron information from the library catalogue that indicates how many videos are contained in this one bibliographic record, or one title and therefore, how many separate videocassettes the patron should expect to view to complete the entire film. In LB86, by virtue of the question posed, the patron is telling the librarian something about how he does not understand the classification system. The librarian is then exchanging that information with other information which is his explanation of “Cuttering” as a way of indicating the author’s last name.

These are information exchanges and further, they are information exchanges that also imply the presence of various types of knowledge. In the first example, the librarian's knowledge appears more personal and experiential – she has prior knowledge or experience of where mathematics is in the collection, she knows what “grade 8 mathematics” looks like either because this is part of her formal training, or through some other kind of experience, in or outside the library. In the other two examples, the catalogue is the primary source of knowledge being used. The catalogue as database and the individual records within the database are coded using a combination of knowledge and information among cataloguers, according to international library standards. The library catalogue as an object is therefore an example of explicit codified knowledge and individual bibliographic records which are accessed through the reference encounters, are also clear examples of explicit knowledge.

5.5.2 The reference encounter as interpersonal communication
Reference encounters also have a very important interpersonal or relational communication dimension which is often but not always recognized as an integral aspect of this information event (Ford, 2003; Radford, 1999). The communication dimension of the encounters observed in this study is integral to understanding how simple or complex the encounter is from an informational and knowledge perspective. Before explaining this relationship, I will first characterize sample reference encounters using this communication lens.
Instruction in reference service includes an emphasis on interpersonal or relational communication skills such as asking open questions, active listening, demonstrating physical gestures such as eye contact and physical proximity, and an ability to bridge the discourse and information gap between the client and librarian through reciprocal conversation and some form of interpersonal connection. URPLO’s policy document, *Reference and Information Services Model Reference Behaviors Checklist (Appendix 10)*, directs the reference desk staff to behave similarly in their encounters with information clients. Before addressing the informational request specifically, the checklist requires staff to first demonstrate approachability and interest, where approachability is characterized as “smiles, makes eye contact, gives friendly verbal greeting, where possible, is at the same eye level as patron” and interest is characterized behaviourally as “maintains eye contact, makes attentive comments, speaks in interested and helpful tone, is mobile, goes with patron, gives patron full attention.” Because this study employs participant observation without the use of any live recording technologies such as audio or video devices, such behaviours can only be recorded indirectly through the researcher’s notes and are described in field notes following “on-desk” conversations with staff. What is significant, however, is that these behaviours are observed in many of the information desk encounters with clients.

The reference encounter does not typically entail an exchange of personal information but it can be a highly personal communication activity, where trust and personal disclosure are clearly present. It is a conversation with a “purpose” (Ross et al 2002) and in these ways it is a form of interpersonal communication. Creation and use of tacit knowledge also rely on communication where making sense of information and shared meanings are outcomes. Rather than viewing communication in the sender-receiver model where information is transmitted along an imaginary path in a narrow “from-to” structure, interpersonal communication that generates tacit knowledge contains a high degree of mutuality and shared negotiation of meaning in a more cyclical or circular structure.

The following reference encounters are transcripts of two separate conversations held between the same patron and the same librarian on the same day but with an interval of time in between:

Patron – Kathy Reichs has written the latest book called *Crossbones*. Do you have it? Librarian – We will have it but it might be out if we do – would you like me to request it? *Crossbones*, [catalogue] says there is one – a paperback copy. There’s also *Break no bones* which is a newer one – have you read that one? Patron – It says there’s one over in the mystery section. I’ll come over to see in a minute. (LB151)
Patron - I didn’t find it – so can you put me on hold for the latest two? Librarian – It will be quite a while before it comes. There are 600 holds on the newest one. Patron – Well, no, that’s not too long. And I’d like paperback because it’s much easier to hold in bed. Librarian – You want to pick up the book here? Patron – And how do they notify me? And I also like Patricia Cornwell, do you have her latest one? Librarian– The library automated voice will call you and there’s a Cornwell book, called Book of the Dead. Patron – I like her character, what’s her name …. Something Italian? Librarian – Kay Scarpetta? Patron – Yes, that’s it. Librarian – OK when it comes to the library, it will be in the Express Reads also – do you know about that? Patron – No, I don’t what’s that? Librarian and Patron – walk over to the express reads shelves. (LB158)

These examples illustrate a typical back and forth conversation that occurs in a reference encounter at these information desks where the patron and staff engage in an extended question-answer exchange. Compared with many of the interactions I observe, however, these are exceptional in that so many words are exchanged; they are, in this way, much more detailed conversations. They also illustrate what I characterize as a mutual communication and establish meaning intersubjectively because the patron and staff member go back and forth together a number of times, to negotiate which books she really intends to read and how the patron will actually get the books home and “in bed” with her. The fact that the patron even returns to the desk with a follow-up question, and that she offers her personal comments on the interaction as it progresses, noting, for example, that 600 holds is not “too long” are explicit suggestions of a reciprocal or mutual structure to their reference encounter. Similarly the librarian engages with the patron beyond only strictly answering her questions by, for example, asking about the patron’s knowledge of “express reads.” Thus, the process of negotiating meaning in a reference encounter can also be understood from a social learning perspective as the process of enacting meaning where the reference encounter is the field for intersubjective activity.

As examples of personal communication however, there is very little explicit evidence in these observations that personal disclosure, trust, affinity, commitment or attention is present – all elements indicating some form of personal connection in a communication activity. In her discussion of virtual teams and their need for face-to-face encounters, Nardi (2005) describes this interpersonal dimension as a “field of connection” (p.91). We might assume, perhaps, that both the patron and librarian are expressing their commitment to each other by their ongoing attention and continued engagement with the information query. Non-verbal communication in the form of proximity and eye contact for example, are not recorded in the text; again, without having a video-recording of the setting, we may only really assume however, that some non-verbal communication was also occurring at the same time. In sum, these examples indicate a high degree of mutual
communication and reciprocity; however, the intensity or depth of any personal connection remains largely implied or at the least, non-verbal. The richest interpersonal communication includes both aspects – the symbolic co-construction of meaning (cognitive) and the relational connections (affective).

Encounters with very limited explicit interpersonal communication are illustrated by these examples:

Patron – Where does one pick up [audio] recorders? Librarian – Just at the circulation desk. (MB42)

Patron – I just need to get the key for the meeting room at the back. Librarian – Oh sure [hands over the key]. (LB131)

Patron – Phone directory for Trenton? Librarian – Up the escalator, turn left and it’s at the back. (LB134)

Patron – I’m looking for a book on identifying flowers and I can’t find anything. Librarian – [Looks on the online catalogue] I think they’re mostly in the oversized … in the gardening section. (SB46)

From a communication perspective, these reference encounters are all similarly limited in that they are all effectively one-way communication structured as limited question-answer. The patron verbalizes his information need, and the reference staff member then replies. Similar to the previous longer conversation about Kathy Reich’s books, however, these encounters also offer no explicit verbal or behavioural evidence of personal connection beyond a basic situational commitment. Commitment again may be assumed because of the situational context – the staff member is at least minimally committed to the client’s question because s/he answers the question with some kind of appropriate and meaningful response.

This analysis has introduced the interpersonal communication aspects of the reference encounter as a “field of connection” (Nardi, 2003) but does not present evidence about the knowledge processes and properties present in the encounters. In the next sections I will undertake a detailed analysis of four types of reference encounters characterized along these two dimensions, information exchange and interpersonal communication.

5.6 Typology of reference interactions
I present four analytical types of reference encounters characterized along these two dimensions of information relationship and interpersonal communication just discussed, as a) transactional b) systematic c) interactional and d) social. These types are represented in Figure 5-6 and are described in Figure 5-7 with defining attributes in each type of reference
encounter as they illustrate information exchange narratives using interpersonal communication. The types of knowledge indicated under each type describe the principal form of knowledge used to resolve the information query. The analysis of these encounters which suggests these typologies is not intended as absolute – that is, the boundaries between these types of encounters are relative. Some encounters are more obviously in one category than another whereas others are more difficult to differentiate. Thus this typology is intended to be provisional and suggestive perhaps of other ways of seeing and understanding information encounters at the reference desk.

For systematic and interactional encounters both types of knowledge are often used, but the former relies first on explicit or codified knowledge from the information systems and the latter relies first on personal experience or tacit knowledge of either one or both members of the interaction. If staff are required to make organizational decisions related to library policy and procedures in their encounters, they tend to use rule-based decision making in transactional and systematic encounters whereas instances where interpretation of policy or procedures occurred in interactional encounters. The information processes indicated under each encounter type characterize the type of processes observed. Within the dimension of interpersonal communication, two attributes are characterized: a) the structure of the communication process and b) a comparative description of the intensity of the field of connection.

The terms “conduit” and “cyclical” refer to metaphorical forms or styles of communication (Budd, 1992; Reddy, 1979, 1993). Whereas the conduit metaphor is characterized as a singular, linear, sender-receiver form (Shannon & Weaver in Budd, 1992, pp 59-65), the cyclical or convergent style refers to a back and forth with potential for learning and interventions and thus is a form of a cycle that resists complete closure (Rogers & Kincaid in Budd, 1992, pp. 131-135). The cycle formally ends when the communication ends although there may be residual meanings that continue with the participants; this metaphor suggests an iterative movement of words and meanings between the staff member and their client. Field of connection is characterized according to its intensity of interpersonal connection again only insofar as it can be observed and inferred from behaviours – including aspects and evidence of physical contact (e.g., eye contact), personal sharing (use of personal names), duration of connection, sense of reciprocity (you hear me / I hear you), affirmation of the exchange through verbal and non-verbal cues. In this sense the field of connection is the degree of interpersonal bond or social glue that ties the librarian and her client together in conversation or interaction.
Finally, mode of practice offers a means of characterizing the primary way that the client and the staff member engage or behave in the task of resolving the information query. In these encounters objectivist and intersubjective modes are differentiated. The former refers to information encounters that are more (at least in appearance) straightforward or transactional involving a specific question and a specific (object-centered) answer. Whereas intersubjective encounters by contrast are those interactions where the type of question being asked and the type of answer being given involve more explicit verbal sharing and disclosure; these encounters are more often a human to human type of encounter. Instructional and social modes are descriptions of encounters where instruction or social activities are the primary activities of these interactions. Social encounters are different from each of the transactional, systematic and interactional encounters because the main purpose in these encounters is not explicitly informational, but is explicitly social.

Within each category, individual encounters vary in their presentation of evidence of these two dimensions. It must be emphasized that finally, each encounter is unique and therefore, cannot be located at precisely the same point with others of the same type. Using sample interactions from across all observation sites, I describe each type, indicating its essential features along these dimensions and explaining its relationship to the other dimensions.

**Figure 5-7. Typology of reference encounters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Transactional</th>
<th>Systematic</th>
<th>Interactional</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information exchange</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of knowledge</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Explicit-tacit</td>
<td>Tacit-explicit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Rule-based procedure</td>
<td>Rule-based policy &amp; proc.</td>
<td>Interpretive policy &amp; proc.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information processes</td>
<td>Information exchange</td>
<td>S-making K-creation</td>
<td>S-making K-creation K-sharing</td>
<td>Information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication structure</td>
<td>Conduit</td>
<td>Conduit</td>
<td>Cyclical</td>
<td>Cyclical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field of connection</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of practice</td>
<td>Objectivist</td>
<td>Instructional</td>
<td>Intersubjective</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the basic level of interaction is the transactional encounter, which is “low” in interpersonal communication because these are the briefest encounters (fewest words exchanged) and there is minimal information shared beyond the basic information and words needed for the client to ask his question and for the staff member to answer the question. In this analysis amount refers specifically to the number of words used and quality refers to the presented complexity of the question. The following encounters typify this transactional cluster:

Patron: Books on house renovations – where would they be? ‘Cause we keep putting in ‘house renovation’ and there’s nothing. Librarian: [looks up on computer, writes down a number and then heads to the shelf with the patron] Come with me. (SB5)

Patron: The little book that gives car prices? Librarian: Oh, yes, the red book? It’s right over here. (MB6)

Patron: Excuse me do you have any application to amend [the voters’ list]? Librarian: Yep. Patron: Could I have two please? Thank you. And each library just has the one for its area? Librarian: Yes, that’s right. Patron: OK, thank you. (MB28)

Patron: Where’s the stairs? Librarian: Right through the doors and down the stairs. We have no down escalator. (LB1)

Patron: I’ve forgotten my library card. Librarian: Do you have any identification with you? Patron: Yes. Librarian: Well, then you can take it to the checkout desk and they’ll help you. (LB24)

In each of these encounters, there is very limited communication between the patron and the library staff member. From one perspective, one might want to interpret the SB5 conversation less as an example of a transactional encounter and more of an occasion where the librarian is enacting a proactive information behaviour such as “roving reference.” However, by definition, “roving reference” is understood as an activity whereby the library staff member is already in the stack areas looking for individuals who might need assistance, as explained by Courtois & Liriano (1999):

Although many reference transactions require leaving the reference desk and accompanying the user to a workstation, we do not consider these instances roving if the user initiated the transaction by approaching the desk. (Courtois & Liriano, 1999)

All interactions discussed in this study also follow this practice and are only interactions initiated at the reference desk. The librarian responds to the patron’s problems with identifying home renovations as a subject in the catalogue by locating the call number and simply taking them to the stacks, presumably to show them the materials on home
renovations instead of taking time to inform them about what search terms might yield the information on the catalogue and/or perhaps how the keyword search works.

In these sample transactions the staff member answers each question directly, but offers no additional verbal statements that indicate personal interest or which suggest a desire for further conversational connection. From an information exchange perspective, the librarians answers each question narrowly, asking only the required clarifying questions such as “do you have any identification with you?” or “the red book?” Reference encounters in this cluster tend to be questions where no interpretation of rules or procedures is required, where the communication is linear in structure: sender – message - receiver. Although I observed many of these types of encounters at each of the study sites, LB, the largest branch had many more of these encounters fall into this category, perhaps because the building itself is larger and there is more wayfinding required by the patrons. Most of these transactional encounters require use of explicit or codified knowledge including the online catalogue, or building maps and guides to resolve the information need. If substituted by an online information database of frequently asked questions and answers these transactional encounters could be resolved, from an information exchange perspective without explicit need for human interaction.

**Systematic** encounters are those interactions which present more than the minimum dialogue or conversation and where the library staff are typically called upon to explain or instruct patrons on navigating the library system. These encounters are “high” in information exchange, but still present little explicit evidence of personal relationship and are characterized as being low from an interpersonal communication perspective. In this category, typically staff still carry out their work, within established library rules and guidelines. What distinguishes this category from transactional encounters is that the information exchange can be characterized as rich involving multiple back and forth exchanges between patron and library staff member.

The following encounter is one representative example of the **systematic** cluster:

*Patron* – I’ve heard that you have some computer terminals. I just want to use one. *Librarian* – We have ones you can reserve for an hour and we have 15 minute ones. Which one would you prefer? *Patron* – Oh, I can use a 15 minute one? *Librarian* – I can check to see if the one-hour ones are available right now? The next one that’s available is not available until 1:15 – do you want to reserve it? *Patron* - OK I’ll spend some time here. *Librarian* – Then I’ll show you how to reserve it? [They move over to the PACs and Librarian instructs the patron on how to book a computer with her library card. It’s apparent by their conversation there that this patron needs to get a card because her husband’s card needs to be renewed.] (MB14)

Many reference encounters at these sites involve requests for information or instruction on using the library’s information technology, whether that is the online catalogue, the public
internet computers or other related equipment such as the photocopier or the printing stations. In MB14, the patron and librarian interact as information partners, although the librarian is clearly the person with the expert information and the knowledge of how to operate the online registration software. The patron communicates her current awareness of this particular library service by invoking her prior knowledge through saying, “I’ve heard ....” The instructional exchange that happens for reserving a computer involves the librarian and patron standing side by side at a public terminal, with the patron entering data, and the librarian pointing to the screen. The computer program indicates that it will not allow this patron to reserve a machine because the card has expired and in this way the computer is implementing or enforcing the library’s policy on computer reservations. In fact, the library’s policy requires that each individual has their own card, and that everyone must reserve or borrow materials or access the internet on library computers, using only their own card. Again the computer provides the explicit knowledge on the library’s policies, while the staff member provides verbal instruction and reinforcement of these policies. Although this type of encounter involves more verbal dialogue than the transactional encounter, the patron’s initial query could theoretically be keyed into a knowledge repository and a full set of detailed instructions including a “show me” guide could be programmed and the informational requirement for human interaction eliminated.

This encounter is also systematic because it involves the librarian making the library’s request system work for the client who is looking for a number of books. The encounter offers little evidence of interpersonal connection as neither the patron nor the staff member discloses more than is what is required to resolve this narrative.

Librarian – Need some help? Patron – I’m trying to request a book but it says it can’t be requested. Librarian – Oh, it’s up for renewal – is this your son’s card? Patron – yes. Librarian – And how old is he? Patron – 14 Librarian – And your address? Patron – [She recites it.] Librarian – OK I just have to read this privacy statement to you – the first paragraph to you ... and she reads the text from the bookmark. And having heard that …. Would you like to receive information from the [URPLO] Foundation for their fundraising activities? Patron – No – and now I can put that request on? Librarian – Yes it should work, now. (SB42)

In this encounter the librarian is applying the library’s policy on renewal of borrower’s cards, which was first made explicit by the computer which “says it can’t be requested.” Again, the computer contains the codified or explicit knowledge of the system, by reporting that this patron’s son’s card is up for renewal. The system is programmed with this policy, by the library staff. In the course of renewing the card, the staff member, then verbally recites the library’s privacy of information statement and finally assists the patron in resolving her initial request to place a hold on a particular item. Given the way the patron introduces her
problem, the librarian also implies that she knows through personal experience, that most often when “it” (the online catalogue) says a book cannot be requested, this is because the patron’s card has expired.

In this type of encounter the library staff are often required to explain how any one of the library’s services works – whether that is to request an item, book a computer, use the inter-library loan service, or simply find materials on the shelves. And further in these kinds of encounters, the staff adopt an instructional tone to their communication; instruction takes time and requires opportunity for communication. As indicated by Ford (2003), face-to-face interactions provide the best means of instruction in library reference encounters. These two examples fall into the category of systematic encounters, because they involve a more mutual information and communication exchange and because they involve instruction on making some aspect of the library’s system work for the patron. They do not, however, demonstrate explicit evidence of sensemaking or tacit knowledge creation and sharing, as is the case in the richest interactional encounters.

Interactional encounters are “high” in both dimensions of information exchange and interpersonal communication and connection. Although these types of encounters were observed infrequently, as micro-narrative structures, they are complex occasions for knowledge and information sharing between patrons and library staff members. The following interactional encounter is similar to the systematic encounter, SB42, in so far as it is largely about helping the patron place requests on items, but seeing how it differs, helps to differentiate the two types of encounters:

Patron – Hi is it better if I do it myself or if I ask you to do it? There’s a guy who walks around town with a pin in his lapel and his name is Daniel Poliquin. Librarian – Well, I can show you how to do it or I can do it for you. Patron – Oh, sounds very educational. Librarian – OK they look together on the computer] does this look like him? Patron – Yes, sure is, - oh this is good, how do I get these books? Librarian – Well, I’ll show you how to limit to branch [and then they look and then he says.] “I’ll write these down for you” Patron / Librarian - [They go back and forth on the titles on the screen] “oh is that in French? Oh yum.” [Librarian keeps writing down call #s for books that they are then going to look at on the shelf.] Patron – So help me a little bit, so this is the first one? And the second? And then this one? …. Oh I see OK … OK I have another one but this woman [and he touches the woman beside him at the desk] is very anxious to talk to you. Patron2 – ‘Oh stop that’ [she says smiling]. Librarian– Well we can request it for you. Patron1 – Perfect, thanks very much. (MB10)

In this encounter the patron and librarian conduct most of their information interaction together – they look at lists of titles together, the patron watches the librarian scroll the list, and comments while doing so and they go to the shelves together. The patron’s comment that “this is good” illustrates that from the patron’s perspective, this is perhaps a better-than-expected answer to the patron’s initial query. There were no words exchanged between the
patron and librarian about who exactly is Daniel Poliquin; the librarian’s ability to search the
catalogue and call up the particular author also suggests either prior knowledge or
experience about either the particular author or the particular type of question. Asking the
patron “does this look like him?” strengthens the informational interaction – together the
patron and librarian identify Daniel Poliquin in this particular informational context.
Interpreting the results so that the patron knows which book is the “first one” and the
“second one” is another way the librarian is involved in instructing the patron on using the
library catalogue’s request system and sharing her expert knowledge about how to
meaningfully and specifically interpret the catalogue record with the patron. To the observer
outside this dyad, we cannot necessarily know with certainty what the “first” and “second”
mean to the patron. The librarian, however, was able to know and importantly, to share that
knowing. This encounter was also being observed by a second patron waiting at the desk.
By making the comic remark combined with a connecting physical gesture, noting that P2 is
“very anxious to talk to you,” P1 garners a smile from P2 and in doing so, brings P2 into their
shared information space with the librarian. Lastly, unlike both the transactional and
systematic encounters, this interactional encounter is not finally resolved solely by the
information technologies available and indeed, nor could it have been.

SB34 is an interactional encounter which also illustrates the strong link between the
quality of the information exchange and the quality of the interpersonal connection. When
both dimensions of the reference encounter are rich or high in these areas, the whole
encounter takes more time, and exhibits a mutual or reciprocal communication structure.
Moreover, there is also strong sense of shared interaction and knowledge creation and
sharing around, “have you read …” and “you might like ….” In this instance, the librarian
recognizes the patron as someone she knows through the library and she initiates a
conversation with the patron about their overlapping interests in reading fiction, especially
mysteries. Further, as evidenced by their conversation, the librarian knows that the patron
has been away on holidays and a personal conversation occurs on that subject. Although I
cannot hear all of the details of this encounter, my notes indicate the substance of this
interaction,

Librarian walks over to a middle aged woman patron at the circulation desk – and says hello
– and then starts talking about mysteries with this patron. ‘Have you read Laura Lipman …
this was a stand-alone one’ - and she and the patron have an extended conversation about
holidays, request lists, and recommended mysteries. They have a 5 minute conversation
back and forth about mystery authors “I read… and I liked … you might like…” coming from
each of them. (SB34)
Book talk or readers’ advisory encounters between and among library staff and patrons is a common and well-documented public library phenomenon that occurs both at the circulation desk while patrons are checking out their books, and at library reference desks (Moyer, 2007). While all RA type encounters are not always interactional, many can be; discussions of personal reading preferences, of why you might like a character or not like a character can reveal personal information and can become their own narratives of why we like or do not like a particular book. Moreover, RA interactions where patron and staff member share both their personal reading knowledge and experiences illustrates the intersubjective mode of this type of interaction. More than systematic encounters which are often instructional in mode with the librarian explaining how to navigate the library as system, these interactional encounters are occasions where knowledge is co-constituted through two readers’ shared sensemaking and knowledge creation processes.

A final example of an interactional encounter is provided in SB35:

‘Red book’ person returns to the desk and is looking for a similar guide for pricing used boats. L1 consults with L2. L2 says, ‘no I’ve never heard of that’. L1 says that she will look on the computer –and proceeds to use the internet. L1 recommends using the internet and looking in the newspaper. L1 – “what kind of boat was it?” P – “an xxxxx boat – inboard, with tanning bed” L1 – “oh, sounds so nice, my parents used to have a boat but they took it away with them when they moved … check the newspapers and call boat dealerships that sell used boats …. You should have a look at this site it’s called boats.com. L1 hands the URL over to the patron and encourages him to go to ‘dealers that deal in used boats’. (SB35)

This client is returning to the information desk having already borrowed the red book for used cars, perhaps in the expectation that the red book might also provide boat prices. In this encounter, the first librarian consults with her colleague (who is more senior) about whether or not she believes this type of publication actually exists. It is clear that the first librarian also has personal knowledge about boats, because apparently she knows what an “XXXX inboard with tanning bed” boat is and then relates her own explanation of her personal knowledge about boats. This mutual experiential or tacit knowledge sharing builds rapport and trust between client and librarian; a stronger communication bond can also lead to higher quality information exchange (insert ref?). Moreover the librarian could be calling more specifically upon her personal knowledge when recommending newspapers and boat dealers than upon her professional knowledge of information sources. The latter expertise is offered through her recommendation of the online website at “boats.com.”

In URPLO’s Reference and Information Service Guidelines policy statement staff are instructed that “when helping customers to find consumer information, staff must guard against offering their own opinions or recommendations even when they have personal knowledge of the subject” (p.8); personal knowledge is not an appropriate information
source for consumer questions. In this case, if the librarian is recommending a specific type of boat for purchase, that could be construed as inappropriate consumer information. Instead, the librarian’s referral of the client to types of information resources (i.e., newspapers and boat dealers) building on her personal knowledge of the subject and her knowledge of how such information is often made available, creates a rich information interaction.

Finally, this encounter can also be characterized as intersubjective because the two librarians build their shared knowledge through the processing of working out how to refer clients to consumer information for boats, not through a “red book” equivalent, but through other more generally available information resources. And although the internet may provide the client’s eventual information access point, this interaction also illustrates how technology is used as only a secondary or supporting knowledge. Would this encounter be different if programmed responses in an answer database were the only available source for this client’s information problem? From an informational perspective, there might be no immediate superficial difference, but from the perspective of interpersonal connection and communication and by recognizing how information referrals arise in such situations, almost certainly. Moreover, as evidence presented in Chapter Six will suggest, it is possible that there are no true information transactions – discrete, narrow, completely resolved, finished products; there is evidence in these observed reference encounters suggesting that many encounters may in fact originate in the information relationships patrons have formed with the reference staff. Many encounters may be just the explicit evidence of yet more interactional cycles in these relationships.

The fourth cluster of encounters can be characterized as social interactions in which instances clients approach reference desk staff, “just for a visit” or for a “social call.” While I observed only a handful of such encounters in each location, they are noteworthy in their uniqueness. These are encounters that are explicitly (based only on observation), low in information exchange and high along the interpersonal communication dimension. Each site had their own cluster of social encounters so it cannot be said that one branch is ‘more’ or ‘less’ attractive on the basis of these responses. The main activity of these encounters is interpersonal connection involving sharing of personal information depending on the strength of the personal relationship. In some instances the social encounters I observed can be described as fragments only. For example, a patron waves and says “hello” to the librarian at the information desk while passing by, or another patron stops by to say, “Thank you so much, this is what a northwest pass looks like” (LB101).
However there are also three occasions where the patron and library staff member engages in a lengthy personal conversation away from the desk (LB146, MB105, SB49). Although I am not able to record all of the details of these encounters because the staff move away from the desk with the patron, going out of my direct hearing distance, I can hear fragments of the conversations and see the friendly non-verbal physical gestures including eye contact, hand gestures and physical position. The line between personal information and library related information exchange, however, cannot always be clearly observed. Discussions about reading and viewing tastes of books and films can be a highly personal exchange. Clearly it is not possible to see on the surface of these interactions either where a personal relationship begins or where a professional relationship ends.

Social interactions can also appear as innocuous or incidental to the business of reference. That would be a transactional interpretation. However, Nardi (2005) suggests that personal connection is essential to sustaining information relationships and many LIS researchers such as Ross et al (2002) emphasize the importance of the librarian making verbal and nonverbal contact with their client in the reference interview. Social interactions can lubricate the social aspect of reference for both the client and the staff member in that the patron develops some trust and ease with the staff member and in this sense, social interactions add value to the information process. These social interactions also suggest that the clients are contributing to the sustained identity and culture of the library, through their small engagements with staff. When the patron “just” wants to connect with the reference staff member, they suggest that they want to connect with their library and not with their grocery store in these ways (Durrance, 1983). As with the interactional encounters, analysis of social encounters observed at these sites suggests that more is happening if we choose to look at these encounters with a slightly different focus. There is a “figure-ground” (Huizing, 2007b) or transaction-interaction social and cognitive phenomenon occurring that will be explored further in Chapter Six.

5.7 Conclusion, chapter summary and key findings
This analysis of reference encounters is presented as a first stage in identifying the types of knowledge and knowledge practices present in the reference encounter at these branches. Using a transactional analysis of these encounters according to “standard” definitions of reference encounters, only one-quarter to one-third of these encounters could be officially defined as reference transactions. However, a second analysis of all encounters that goes
beyond this standard definition, introduces these additional categories of encounters: “chat,” “wayfinding,” “policy and procedure,” “locate item,” and “technology.”

From this preliminary descriptive analysis, a typology of all reference encounters is introduced to describe four types of encounters observed, classified along three dimensions of information exchange, interpersonal communication and mode of behaviour. Information exchange is further characterized by these three dimensions: a) types of knowledge present; b) decision-making applied; and c) information processes in use. Interpersonal communication is characterized further according to the dimensions of a) communication structure and b) field of connection. A final dimension “mode of behaviour” distinguishes these four modes observed: a) objectivist; b) instructional; c) intersubjectivist; and d) social. All of these concepts will be developed further in Chapter Six which introduces the notions of information relationships and knowledge-based practice. As a preliminary response to research questions #1 and #2 regarding types of knowledge and knowledge processes at work, these findings emerge:

1) From a knowledge perspective, all reference encounters including information transactions currently defined by some North American professional library associations and public library organizations as “standard” and including all other reference staff-client human activity which takes place in this context, can more accurately and inclusively be defined within a typology of reference interaction. Reference interaction is only one unit of analysis of reference desk “work.”

2) This preliminary typology describes all reference encounters as either more transactional (in the transactional and systematic categories) or more interactional (in the social and interactional categories) according to the types of information exchange and communication processes at work. The categories of this typology do not have firm boundaries, however, and are suggestive only of their informational content, and of their range and type of social, informational and communication processes that can be present in any one-to-one reference librarian-client encounter.

3) Interactional encounters incorporate the greatest range of knowledge processes including sensemaking, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. Tacit knowledge is in use more often in interactional and social encounters; explicit knowledge is more readily and easily visible in systematic and transactional encounters.
4) *Four provisional modes of behaviour by these staff-client dyads can be distinguished from this descriptive typology: objectivist, instructional, social and intersubjectivist.*

If we see the provision of reference service as only an aggregated sum of transactions meeting technical definitions and being reported as narrow, discrete information products, it is logical from a financial perspective to understand why public library managers would be moving to contain or reduce costs by replacing professional librarians with less expensive library technicians and assistants and also by moving to develop more pervasive use of self-serve technology solutions for what are essentially human interactions. This chapter has argued for re-naming and re-conceptualizing *reference transactions* as *reference interactions* that can be characterized along equally important dimensions related to their informational content and to their process. However, if we take a step further and interpret these interactions using a practice-based approach, the meanings change again. The analysis and discussion of the reference desk as practice in Chapter Six extends the analysis of the reference desk encounters from single events or encounter into multiple events linking both staff and patrons by what I will characterize principally as relational attributes - over-timeness, information empathy, confidentiality and invisibility.
Chapter Six
Reference service as relational practice

Having spent the equivalent of six and a half weeks working alongside staff at URPLO’s information desks, I saw, in an immediate way, how much more goes on at these information desks than can be captured only by an analysis of information questions being answered one-at-a-time by individual staff members. In this chapter I will introduce the idea of information relationships as another type of knowledge-centered, co-constituted activity that is created between and reference staff and their clients, through repeated, diachronic interactions at the reference desk. Building on the typology of information encounters presented in the previous chapter, this chapter will move the focus from the individual reference encounter as “transaction” or “interaction” to a focus on the collective of these encounters and informational experiences at all branches. Taken together, these experiences of reference service as I am arguing for their analysis as interactions and as information relationships, begin to form a more complex social-theoretical view of the public library’s reference service as a relational practice. Initially, however, for the purposes of analysis and presentation of findings in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, the term “practice” is still understood and used in a general sense to refer to what people do as that may be distinct from what they say they do. From this standpoint as an ethnographic researcher then, reference practice as it is discussed in this chapter is an ongoing series of habitual performances conducted interactionally by clients and reference staff as I observed these activities taking place at these reference desks by this library’s reference staff members and library clients. This chapter places emphasis on the relationships that develop over time at the reference desk.

This chapter will address these research questions:

Q2: What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients’ reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?

Q3: What role, if any, do the public library (as organization) and the branch library reference unit’s beliefs, values and organizational culture both documented and

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22 According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2008) **practice** means “1) to do or perform often, customarily, or habitually or 2) to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient.” [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/practice](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/practice)
enacted, play in knowledge sharing and use processes between and among library reference staff and their clients?

In narrative terms, the interpretive question becomes “What is the larger plot of the reference desk service in these branches as it is informed by the micro-stories of individual patron-staff encounters?” Or in organizational terms, the same question can be phrased as “What interpretive framework best reflects the knowledge and information processes occurring at these library reference desks?” Management, staff and patron interview transcripts along with the field notes and observational data weave a rich understanding of this public library practice.

This chapter will present two organizational perspectives on the reference desk service: 1) a “self-serve/triage” reference service framework as it is conceptualized both in the literature and by the chief executive and library managers and 2) a social, relational and highly dynamic service as it is enacted by reference staff in three different libraries within this same organization and as it has been observed and understood by the researcher. I end this chapter with a summary of key findings and the preliminary concepts that suggest a revised conceptual framework, which will be introduced and discussed in length in Chapter Seven.

6.1 The triage notion of reference service

Interviews with senior URPLO managers including the CEO, the manager of strategic planning, the manager of reference service for the organization and selected branch managers were conducted after the researcher’s observations in the library branches had been completed. These informants provide a particular point of view on the organization and performance of the reference service in the library system and they share a common view that “triaging” is the most effective way to provide reference service within their budgetary constraints. The fiscal and political environment in which URPLO operates is similar to many other libraries and municipal governments with an emphasis on finding efficiencies, re-allocating budgets and increasing use of technology as principal strategies for managing with decreasing budgets.

23 The notion of triage comes from health care services and has been discussed both specifically and more generally as a structure or approach in the provision of reference services in the literature (Pomerantz, 2004; Pomerantz et al, 2003; Warner, 2001). The essential feature of triage is that the appropriate level of expertise is sought based on the type of question posed. As an approach to question referral, this model is becoming more widely used in intra-library and collaborative virtual reference services.
The model of triage at the reference desk involves the assignment and priority routing of information questions to the appropriate person with expertise and training. In the triage reference service scenario the belief is that savings can be achieved if patrons with simpler questions either self-select or are referred to lower paid staff members (who may be in larger or smaller branches), whereas patrons with more complex questions self-select or are referred to the higher paid reference staff (at the Main Library Reference Department) who are experienced answering more complex information queries. Additional savings could be achieved if even more questions were asked and answered directly through an automated environment using information technologies. This technique originates with the earliest business re-engineering strategies (Hammer & Stanton, 1994) and its purpose is to streamline processes:

Traditional one-size-fits-all processes are usually very complex, since they must incorporate special procedures and exceptions to handle a wide range of situations. A multi-version process, by contrast, is clean and simple, because each version needs to handle only the cases for which it is most appropriate. There are no special cases and exceptions (Hammer & Stanton, 1995, pp. 55-56).

This approach is not dissimilar to the call-centre or customer relationship management system (CRM) (Dilevko, 2001); such a referral structure for reference and information services is also used in virtual reference services within library systems and among library networks (Gray, 1995; Pomerantz, Nicholson & Lankes, 2003). In their systems-based approach to reference service in an academic library, Brandeis library managers introduce two separate desks, effectively a tiered service where questions that are “quick” or “ready” reference can be answered by paraprofessionals and questions of a more in-depth nature can be answered by professionals (Gray, 1995). Although use of multiple service points, such as a “reader's advisory” or “fiction” desk, a

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**The corporate strategy: the CEO's vision for reference**

“My goal would be if we could get the repetitive stuff out of the way so that you are focusing on the more critical information.” (MGMT IN1)

“Triage” the preferred model of reference service

“I believe it is almost like a triage kind of thing, where the Public Service Assistant fields level one kinds of questions and if they can't get to the answer then bump it up to the next level and if you do not have the access to the information in your particular location, then you bump it up to the district level or you go directly downtown or you get onto our instant chat reference running on a regular basis then you can get the information that way.” (MGMT IN2)

“The technical thing” and virtual reference

“I also think we have to do the whole technical thing. We need 24 hour around the clock reference service in conjunction with other folks.” (MGMT LIN1)
“quick reference” desk, and a “research level” reference desk may be possible in larger public libraries, in many other medium and smaller libraries, there are inadequate resources to support this practical differentiation. One desk with one staff member, professional librarian or paraprofessional answers all types of questions, whether they are “simple” or “complex”. At another university (Warner, 2001) with only one reference desk, clarification of the question classification system as a triage is sought to aid staff members in identifying appropriate training needs for their services.

From URPLO’s corporate perspective, the reference service already employs a triage model which may simply need further adjustment. Specifically, the library’s chief executive appreciates the need for human contact while at the same time indicating the need for an efficient technology-supported “business” model for the service which may also mean challenging previous assumptions about “how we run” this aspect of library business. She also understands and explicitly verbalizes the organization’s political requirement to have people “go away happy” so that they “will support the library.”

What you want to do is get people off the boring, repetitive tasks to as great an extent as possible and into the interaction where the exchange is more ambiguous and a lot of that you cannot automate. You have to have people to do that. You also need people to keep order and interact with people so that they will support the library. It’s hard to support a service if you don’t connect with it. I am always fascinated with the studies that say, “if the people get good personal service they will go away happy.” You have to touch the person, share a laugh with them, inquire about whatever - make a connection…. and what that might suggest is that you need a triage system just like a hospital, with various levels of staff because often it can be dealt with at a different level of expertise. I think it is part of maintaining what is already happening in a lot of places. I have no desire to turn the library into an automaton kind of place, but in order to handle the volume and deal with the economics of things; we have to automate as much as we can. The flip side of the technology in the libraries of the future is that the technology frees you up to be interactive with people every day. (MGMT LINT1)

There is an explicit tension and ambiguity between these two perspectives in this informant’s comments on future plans for the library’s reference service. Efficiency for this library organization and the reference services in particular is to be realized through increased use of liberating technologies so that the “boring, repetitive tasks” are mechanized, and through a triage structure where expertise is known, staff are organized on that basis, and client queries could ideally be categorized according to level of difficulty in this case. She also recognizes the clients’ needs for human connection but in so far as these needs affect allocation of organizational resources (staff and technologies), such a human connection remains linked to expertise and level of difficulty (of the question). The process of triaging for this organization is also established by location or library branch used. And instead of staff being stationed at designated information desks, these managers also want to see their
reference staff “roving” or “roaming” (Bourne, 2005) the library, which is explained in this way:

It’s a proactive approach to sales, like you see in the store. What I hate is going into a store and everybody leaves you alone. You want someone to come up to you and say, “Can I help you?” and you want to be acknowledged. This is roving the staff. They are roaming around and trying to be observant, not being intrusive, but being the helpful staff person because we know people are confused, but it is difficult for them to ask sometimes, so if we can bridge that gap between the institution and the users, that’s a good thing too. (MGMT LINT1)

The formal job descriptions which define the primary tasks for staff who work at the URPLO information desks reflect this conceptual difficult/not difficult form of categorizing reference questions. The major difference in duties between the two levels of staff assigned to work at the library’s reference service points is described contractually in the library’s job descriptions. Staff in both the public service assistant position and in the librarian position job classifications are directed to “provide direct customer service by answering Library users’ queries.” But it is only the lower-paid desk assistants who are additionally instructed to refer “difficult queries to the senior staff” (Appendices 11 & 12). There are no such statements regarding level of difficulty in the reference librarian job descriptions; librarians are capable of and are compensated to answer both the easy and the difficult questions.

The reference department manager takes a slightly different analysis suggesting that it is the library clients themselves who triage their information questions through their choices of the library branches they visit. Like the CEO, however, her analysis of the reference clients’ usage, also contains an inherent contradiction. Her belief and experience suggests that library clients select their branch based on the level of expertise they expect to receive in answering their questions; however, she also observes that the same users do not always know the precise structure and difficulty or depth of their information query “until [they] open [their] mouths:"

I think that the hard/easy thing does not really apply with me, but what does is I think people who provide this service in the system have different experience with different types of questions, not because of their abilities necessarily, but because of the expectations of the clients who come into the branch …. People go to the big library with the big questions and they don’t so much go to the little library with the big questions. Could those people answer them? Probably. Of course we don’t know it’s a big question until we open our mouths and we might not even know we have a question until we go there and we might find … an expert at the small branch. (MGMT LINT4)

In this variation of triage, the library staff at “big” branches are seen as more experienced and more capable of answering “bigger” questions because these questions are asked more frequently at large libraries by the clients who have triaged themselves according to their
experience and expectations of library service according to the library size. Library size is understood to be characterized by the size and level of specialization of its collections.

As described in this model, then, differentiation in levels of staff knowledge between the paraprofessionals or public service assistants and their professional colleagues, the librarians, and differentiation of questions into simple and more difficult, are the two means of formally or explicitly drawing these bounds. However, neither the raw data nor the interactional analysis presented in Chapter Five finally enables this demarcation to be reliably or soundly delineated.

As a participant observer, though I was aware of which staff members were paraprofessionals and which were librarians throughout my observations, it was impossible to “see in action” and then further to “know in action” differences in the levels of any type of knowledge or expertise required by the staff to address the clients’ questions or conversations. All front-line staff interviewed for this study were asked whether or not they believed “being [or not being] a librarian made a difference” and, in stronger or more measured language, the answer was similarly “yes, it makes a difference”. However, only the rare respondent could or perhaps would say why they thought that was the case as in this librarian’s explanation:

I think [it makes a difference] but there’s always going to be exceptions – and you know you can’t judge the rule by the exception. You know you have more invested in it in one sense. In the library. And just from my limited experience with the PSAs, they’re going to be less interested in the policies, less interested in the super-structure, in what’s guiding everything over all. And they don’t get that aspect of it, and I do think, You know it’s the education. They don’t have the – I don’t know if they have the educational requirements to answer some of the questions. A masters degree is built on a BA often times a liberal arts degree which makes you a generalist. So if someone wants to know about what is an amoeba and you can take them to where that is. And there’s a reason you know that librarians are generalists.

And you feel like you call on that knowledge on a regular basis?

Definitely. That’s the weird range of things you get. (LIBINT4)

Although this librarian clearly identifies more with the “super-structure” of the library, and believes professional education and experience makes some difference, that difference was rarely “visible” in desk interactions.

More importantly, the goal and research questions guiding this study do not invite such evaluative analysis, do not draw lines about “more” or “less” knowledge, or “better” or “worse” reference skills, or “professional” or “paraprofessional” designations, although such relative implications might be drawn by readers. These research questions and the responses presented in Chapters Five and Six are designed to create a rich, ethnographic
narrative or description of a particular lived library practice, a knowledge practice of learning and knowing. Management’s view of the service described here in model-theoretic language of a triage structure suggests their organizational and cultural view of reference service in their libraries.

Thus URPLO’s managerial and strategic approach to structuring reference services and to managing the costs for this service is based on a locally adapted version of triage. In this conceptualization the variables that are considered relevant include: level of difficulty of the question, size of branch and branch collections, level of formal expertise of staff, hours of reference desk service offered, and ability to automate more questions and answers using information technology or other virtual reference services. However, these managers also acknowledge some of the tensions and unresolved questions about the triage model; their ambiguous statements suggest that at this point they are also engaged in a sensemaking process to understand how the external environment including the political context should affect their internal organizational and service design. The results of an analysis of reference interactions presented in the previous chapter underscore the difficulties management would have in justifying through human resource efficiencies, a “one-size fits all” or a multi-version triage model to any group of interactions. Some of the library clients approach and some of the library clients leave the information desk for other reasons and with other motivations than to receive only an answer to a specific, cognitively known informational question. We know this because the observational data as they are presented in Chapter Five describes what conversations and behaviours have taken place. While at least two managers articulate knowledge of this fact, the organizational models and strategies they discuss still discount it. In the next discussion, interpreting my observations and interactions with staff but adding data from participant interviews, I will offer another model of reference service that is based on sociality, relationship and practice.

6.2 One story of information relationship

To introduce the notion of information relationships at the reference desk, the following interview excerpt touches on many of the aspects which will be discussed in detail in this section. Suzanne, the librarian, responds to a futuristic rendering of service at the branch library where information and communication technologies are completely embedded into the daily library activities and where self-serve library service is the standard. She explains why she believes library clients want to see more than high functioning information technologies in their libraries of the future: she believes that many clients will still want
human interaction and potentially the information relationships that build on these interactions. In describing how she empathizes with this social worker patron who is looking for fiction that takes her out of her real world, Suzanne highlights the significance of repeated visits or "over-timeness" where reference clients become "regulars" and where trust is established as a "good back and forth" conversation occurs.

In this story, the information relationship is built around books as the knowledge objects, around the novels that are "fluffy and light." In summing up the value of the interaction, Suzanne notes how she herself learns from the interaction and how she might apply that learning with another library client:

Interviewer: And if 10 – 15 years down the road, patrons are coming into the library and finding everything they want but none of the people because there’s self check-out, and a virtual reference kiosk with voice activation or Skype or VOIP and there’s delivery so the material is all here – so really there’s more of a security guard for managing the day to day – how do think that would be and what difference would it make or not?

Librarian: Three-quarters of our people wouldn’t be here.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Librarian: With such certainty? Because they have as much as said so – where they prefer dealing with a person – having somebody who knows you – it may take you a few months to really build up a good back and forth with some of the regulars but … having somebody come in who’s a social worker and sees horrible things every day – she doesn’t want the latest Da Vinci code where people are being tortured and it’s horrible – she wants something fluffy and light.

Interviewer: She tells you that?

Librarian: Over the course of a couple of visits. And so when she comes in now, it’s ‘so oh, I saw something the other day you might like.’

Interviewer: You actually had this experience with this patron?

Librarian: Oh yes, because we see what’s in our collection – it could be that one of our regulars – sweet 70 year old returns a CD – saying ‘this is such a nice family story, you know it’s a generation’ I can pick up the same cd saying, ‘somebody just brought it back, they loved it - you know it’s about ….

Interviewer: For the next person – this social worker who wants something lighter.

Librarian: That’s it – while computers are great and they’re evolving, there’s only so much they can do, there’s only so much back and forth and they may be able to say this book is about the generations of a family living in Devonshire England but the computer’s not going to have heard the one person talk about how while the grandmother wound up taking in one of the grandchildren, because the daughter died as a nurse in the war, but that let the grandchild go on to this school and she became an author – and that might really intrigue somebody else. (PBLINT1)
This patron-librarian relationship is characterized by repeated interactions over months, by disclosure and sharing of book talk which is a form of knowledge sharing, and of personal talk. It also highlights a clear distinction between the explicit knowledge available in the library’s computers and the tacit or experiential knowledge the librarian uses from one interaction to the next. The interactions occur around books as knowledge objects, and where the librarian is called upon to remember and build on each successive interaction she has with her social worker client. Many of the more subtle nuances of these dimensions remain unacknowledged in the “triage” model of reference service as it has been articulated by the library’s managers and in the literature on reference referrals; the librarian-client reference model is more relational and these dimensions will now be explored. It is important to note that this excerpt describes only one relationship story and thus it can only be representative of itself. There are many other versions of client interactions where a range of different types of responses could be presented depending on a range of potential variables such as the client's age or years of experience with the library or their literacy level. However, as an example, this characterization of a client-librarian relationship also suggests that there could be many other types of stories hidden in such unrecorded exchanges among reference staff and their clients. The following discussion draws attention to a number of essential features of such information relationships drawing on field notes, observations and interview transcripts.

6.3 A social-relational view of reference service

Whereas the triage model of reference service is presented both as an economic efficiency and as an approach consistent with existing client behaviours, the observations and interviews with front-line study participants tell another interpretive story where other dimensions of reference service figure more prominently. In this discussion information relationships are defined as follows:

- Successive librarian-client interactions over time;
- occurring in the context of the library as common space/place;
- with the potential of having affective, informational and social relational attributes;
- negotiated using knowledge objects and information subjects
- where shared understandings are incrementally developed.
Information relationships are built on various types of interactions between a library client and a reference librarian. They are established and maintained through these processes that occur in repeated encounters over time: engaging in intersubjective sensemaking, knowledge creation and sharing around information subjects and objects and ongoing learning. These processes are negotiated around information subjects and library’s knowledge objects such as the catalogue, the computer or items from the library’s collections. Underlying the informational-relational activity at the reference desk is the contextual perspective where client and staff member meet and that is the space/placeness of not just any space, but of the public library specifically.

6.3.1 The common ground of the library place/space
There is only ever one public library organization with perhaps with many different spaces or buildings where the activities of “library” take place. In the context of this study, the library as place/space is both the institutional structure and the social-informational context in which the reference service is both physically located and philosophically oriented. This library common ground of place and space is made up of shared knowledge, beliefs and assumptions and it is tacitly understood by participants through their behaviours, language and in so far as they might be visible, by their shared understanding of the library's institutional values such as democracy, information access, privacy, and lifelong learning. People know where they are in their library moments of interaction and anyone who enters the library space is a de facto member. These characteristics of the common

**Patron: A library is not a bookstore**
If I go to a bookstore like Chapters, I am not comfortable sitting there, it's just one of those things .... But I am not comfortable hanging around. A bookstore is someplace where you look for your book, buy it and go. Kids have grown up with this. I did not like that they call the books the 'product.' I am more comfortable in a library. A library can be bigger and more impersonal but I have always been in libraries .... When you live downtown there are not too many good walks, you have to go somewhere, my goal is the library. I like to be able to come in and I recognize people but I don't always feel like chatting. I call it my home away from home. These are kind of culture places where you go and hang out and I think that is the way I think about this one. I am comfortable here, I know my way around, it's central and I meet people here .... I think the staff is what makes it so comfortable. (PIN2)

**Staff: A library is not a grocery store**
You know I think it's more about interaction than something else – than a transaction ... and what makes it different than say a grocery store or somewhere else, is that the library is more personal - you learn and grow here all the years .... You develop part of your identity here. (FN12)
ground of library place/space are critical for organizational knowledge creation, sharing and
learning.

In this study common ground is observed as both the individual branch library
spaces, particularly around the reference and information desks, and as the values, beliefs
and norms or routines that make up patron-reference staff discourse and culture. Clients
and staff alike have an understanding of library but always from their individual perspectives
– of its identity consisting of beliefs, values and distinguishing attributes and some basic
notion of its practice. Elaborating on the observational data, I posed a reflective question in
the patron interviews about what makes the library its own distinct space for you, or put
comparatively, “How is the library different from or similar to other public spaces you
frequent?” In turn, staff members were asked how they might interpret patrons’ uses of the
library buildings and public spaces. Some patrons compared their public library to a
bookstore or to a grocery store and occasionally to a recreational community centre.
Although in these instances even if the patron or staff member could not say precisely why
the library was a different or unique space, some difference is still being insisted upon: “It’s
more prolonged. …. I think it is different, again just because people who read books can be
a different sort of people” (SB PIN#2). Even though the spaces may appear similar in some
superficial ways, patrons generally recognize how the commercial interests of a bookstore
differ widely from the public-democratic interests of most public libraries. They articulate
this difference and in doing so, confirm that on some level they understand one of the
central values of the library as a public and non-commercial space.

Moreover, for clients and librarians to be able to understand and then articulate even
incompletely, why a library is different from other types of public or commercial spaces
suggests that these participants share an understanding of library as a space and they
share an interest in and understanding of a particular range of library-type activities such as
reading, borrowing materials, using the internet, asking information questions and consulting
information resources. Embedded in this understanding of library is also a sense of the
library’s compelling and enduring institutional identity, qualities understood slightly differently
by patrons and library staff. As the study of the Seattle Public Library (Fisher, Saxton et al,
2007, p. 153) suggests, libraries have a distinct informational component which should be
added to the place-based frameworks used to understand public spaces. And this
component is more than simply an association with books – it is “comprising all themes
regarding information finding and seeking, reading, lifelong learning, learning resources and
learning environments” (p.153). Library spaces link people who share or somehow understand and want to participate in this practice.

From the CEO’s perspective, however, the pervasive identification of the public library with “books” is too limiting and is problematic in some ways: “Books and more books, that’s the only brand we have, that’s the problem…. I have often said when you have almost 10 million items going in and out and you’ve your whole electronic infrastructure and all of the care and attention that takes, that can take you away from the fact that the art is the interaction with the human being” (MGMT LIN1). Again, she draws attention to what she sees as a conflict or tension between the library’s identity as primarily object-centered and transaction-oriented in “books and more books” versus an identity based on intersubjective connections achieved through “interaction with human being[s].” Clearly the library’s organizational and institutional identity manifest in its public sense of place and space is co-constructed and has relative meanings according to the ways it is structured and used.

6.3.2 The culture of chit-chat

While these basic interpersonal and affective behaviours are already formalized in reference training and reference behaviours and while they were characterized in Chapter Five as a field of connection, more interventionist and explicit methods for making interpersonal connections were also observed in these libraries. For example, the behavioural norm at SB branch is to greet all patrons by their name (if known) in addition to making eye contact and based on the researcher’s observation period, most of the patrons were known by name. Staff explain that they know most patrons, adults and children, by name because of the smallness of the branch and because most of the staff are long-time employees at this particular location. In another way to encourage connection, a team leader encourages staff to engage in social talk as a deliberate means for making this interpersonal connection:

Librarian: I think that small chit-chat makes it feel like a more approachable environment, usually when you’re chitchatting, you’ve got a smile on your face, you’re usually talking about something that’s not always a pleasurable conversation, but for the most part it is. Just that I think makes people feel like they can come up to the information desk because you’ve already got a smile, they see that you can chat, so that’s part of it. And the chitchat with the patrons, with the public, even if you’ve never had a reference interaction with them, just seeing them come in on a regular basis and saying hello, and start having a little bit of a relationship with them means that someday when they do have difficulty finding what they want that they will have no problems about coming to you. And it makes them realize that you’re there, and you’re there for that, if you can sort of initiate this chit-chat.

Interviewer: Does it matter what the chit-chat is about?
Staff and patrons refer to this social interaction variously as “banter,” “chit-chat,” “connection” or simply “talk” and while it can be both informational and interpersonal, most importantly it is about making a human connection that could, but does not necessarily, lead to an information encounter. In some instances, patrons come into the library and engage with the staff simply to have a social connection – “Oh I just came by to say hi” (Harris & Dewdney, 1994).

The line between simply a social connection and an occasion for information and knowledge sharing can blur quickly however, and this shift is understood by many of the regular patrons and staff alike as an accepted possibility of the information desk practice. It is a unique dimension of the reference interaction which has no real parallels in other public, informational settings. “Books” and information topics are the objective foci of these encounters, enabling sometimes very personal connections, as indicated in these reflections by a patron and two librarians:

Patron: Sometimes [we talk] about the books I am requesting or asking about, but sometimes we share a little bit of our personal selves too. For example, she [the librarian] told me her husband paints and I painted for 10 years myself then I gave it up. She likes to read nothing but mysteries because she says she likes a good story and I like a good story too. I am a little disillusioned with writers like Chekov because the endings are so weak. It’s very sensitive writing, but it doesn’t go anywhere. This is how I feel and she feels the same way. (MBPINT1)

Librarian: I think that this is the only connection that some people have. There are lots of people, I think, that come in here to talk. This is the branch I know and I am not sure it happens at every branch, but in my experience here, for sure.

Interviewer: How do you know that’s what they want?
Librarian: Connection? Because they never stop talking. Some people you have to pull away because they will be there forever and it is not about information at that point, it's about how they are feeling or sometimes they will mask it as I need to know this and I need to know that, but my guess is it's human contact that they want. (MB LIN3)

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Librarian: Like you were saying about the regulars, there are people that know how to interact with me, so then they come back and we do our little banter. I let my guard down a little bit, I am happy to joke around with people. It helps. I am very tense all the time, so it releases some tension for me. (LB LIN2)

Thus, patrons and library staff alike participate in this library-based sociality for many different and ultimately highly personal reasons – as introductions to their information encounters, to make “human contact,” to share knowledge and information, to relieve other “tension[s],” and/or to be recognized or to become visible in the public sphere. What is also clear, however, is that it seems to matter that these connections occur in the context of or in the practice of library types of informational activities.

In addition to the basic interpersonal behaviours of sharing time, sharing space, eye contact, and physical proximity, this data reveal other more nuanced social-informational dimensions of the staff-client encounters: self-disclosure, privacy, trust and repetition. While the public library is legislatively required to maintain patrons’ privacy of information, the day to day interpersonal relationships and connections are governed neither by legislation nor by official library policy.

The Reference & Information Services Guidelines note only that “All questions are treated as confidential interactions between staff and customers.” Reference service at URPLO is understood as an information provision service; the policy and guidelines are silent on how to handle interpersonal connections, social talk, and patron-staff relationships. However, observations at these branches suggest that an unwritten understanding exists respecting patron privacy around even “chit-chat,” “book talk” or social “banter” that may take place. Unless indicated by the patron who might interact with multiple staff members at a particular location over time, the norm is for these patron-reference staff member conversations to remain private and undocumented. A common outcome of this desk norm is that repeat patrons develop preferred staff members – those people with whom they have shared talk, perhaps disclosed personal information, and in the midst of the talk, established a certain level of trust and a shared experience.

As noted earlier, even before reference patrons might become reference regulars – there is often a critical point in an information encounter when the field of connection,
whether it is verbal chit-chat or physical proximity and an indication of availability, shifts into
information talk and at this point, we begin to hear the knowledge and information
management processes – sensemaking, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing –
being enacted. These processes can be triggered when librarians introduce their personal
forms of information empathy into the individual interactions. Where there is no distinct chit-
chat or social talk, the interaction begins in the informational talk. And in yet other
interactions, there is only a more physical and affective sense of commitment explicit mutual
banter or talk. However, in any of these instances, information empathy on the part of the
reference librarian may be present, and its presence is another indication that collaborative
knowing and sharing is also occurring.

6.3.3 Information empathy in sensemaking and knowledge sharing
The librarian’s ability to create a form of recognition and identification with the client based
on an information encounter is characterized as information empathy where empathy is
defined as “the capacity to understand and enter into another person’s feelings and
emotions or to experience something from the other person’s point of view.” Information
empathy is an additional element within the reference desk field, which offers potential as a
dimension for connection in the patron-librarian encounter. The librarian can exhibit
empathy to collaborate with the client in resolving their particular information query in the
moment. In a previous example, the librarian takes the interpersonal connections she has
made in conversation with the social worker client and applies them to the task of
recommending books for her to read: the Da Vinci Code is not appropriate because the
librarian knows the novel and now relates the knowledge that her client is a social worker to
the book context. And instead an English generational family novel is recommended and is
well-received by the patron as evidenced by her return visits for further recommendations.

Information empathy can be transitory or of a more enduring or sustained nature. It
is different from other communicative, affective or physical dimensions of the reference desk
field of connection because it is a link created specifically through information sharing. The
client or librarian discloses or shares some piece of information about himself in the course
of his interaction which then gives the librarian a means for responding also through the lens
of information sharing. The context for sharing is informational, with the librarian trying to
“help them explore what they’re trying to find” as the informant describes the process in this
interview excerpt. Further, whereas sometimes the client simply moves from chat to pose

24 Source: Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, http://www.m-w.com
his question – “do you have this book?” at other times, he may simply begin the interaction immediately with an informational request such as “I’m looking for information on this subject” where the field of connection occurs during the informational encounter. This librarian explains how he feels and why he responds so empathically to his client’s informational interaction in this interview excerpt:

Librarian: It’s almost like case by case … you never have a pre-set formula, you know. You’re always trying to help them explore what they’re trying to find. And I don’t think that they come to you, you know sometimes they come to you and they don’t have their ideas fully formed, so you’re trying to tease that out, and work that through. Most people come with kind of a half an idea and you have to work through it.

Interviewer: You’re relatively new at the branch – and we’ve talked about this on the desk – do you feel like you’re building relationships with people? Whether you know their names or not?

Librarian: Yeah, oh yeah. It is so funny, how you’re like the confessor, you know you are the priest, or the bartender, like a guy today starts spilling his guts. It was a good one, I wish you’d been there. He was having a spiritual crisis. He’s very well dressed, economically very well off, middle aged. It’s so funny what people will tell you, you know they almost have to tell you because they’re like … A lot of times they’re researching something that’s very private and he wanted this book, “What should I do with the rest of my life?” by a self-help author that’s really popular. And he just started talking to me – he said, “My sister died 2 years ago and my brother died the year before that” – and he’s like “You know, I’m starting to have some questions, you know I’m a chef, I know what I’m doing with my work life but I just have some bigger questions.” And he wasn’t upset, though. He wasn’t upset – he was ready to start thinking about things. And I just said, “You know death’s like that, you have to start thinking about things, you know you can’t put things off.”

Interviewer: You said that?

Librarian: Yeah. It was a serious conversation.

Interviewer: Why would you say that? Why do you feel like you can and want to?

Librarian: Because he was reaching out, you know, he’s opening up and that sometimes is a little uncomfortable. It can be, but at the same time, in modern life people are very isolated sometimes. And it’s a public library and it’s some place they can be out in public. And I do think people do feel isolated and it’s a way for them …. And if they’re going to open up, you know, I don’t think you should go “oh --- get back, get back, too much” And sometimes yeah, but death, you know, death you’re not supposed to talk about in public. And I’ll talk about death, I’ll talk about that. And his point was, he says, to me, “You know my sister died, and my dad, he thought it was nothing. Get over it. Just get over it. … And I don’t think so. Death – something like that you shouldn’t just get over it.” And I thought, you know that’s a very wise thing to say, and so he wanted to get this book to help explore that.

Interviewer: Did you know this book?

Librarian: Yeah, other people, had asked for it. But I mean, I’m not perfect. I do find that sometimes when people do that, you know, I mean you do feel a little uncomfortable, and I think that’s more your problem, not his.

Interviewer: Why do you feel uncomfortable?
Librarian: Well I just think that anytime you’re talking to a stranger about something very personal, it can be a little uncomfortable, but you know I’d rather criticize myself and think it’s my own neuroses, not his problem. You know, if I’m uncomfortable, it’s because I’m uncomfortable and it’s not his problem, you know?

Interviewer: Do you think it’s part of the job?

Librarian: Yeah, yeah I do ….

Interviewer: Now if this guy comes back in a couple of weeks, and returns the book, would he recognize you? And would you remember him?

Librarian: Oh yeah. (MBLINT1)

In this reference story, the librarian responds empathetically to the client’s disclosure which sets his title request in a particular context. In explaining his reaction to his sister’s and then to his brother’s death and then noting his father’s advice to “just get over it,” the patron is reaching out with information and context to frame his question about this particular book. The librarian can then make more sense of the request and rather than simply verifying the title in the catalogue and providing a call number she engages with the patron in a shared sensemaking conversation. The librarian shares her own knowledge and personal experience of death by advising her client that “you know death’s like that, you have to start thinking about things, you know you can’t put things off.” Despite a feeling of discomfort at the personal nature of the topic, the librarian also understands her reaction and can nevertheless respond with empathy.

In another example of information empathy, a patron, Mr. M., comes to the desk and asks for a book on how to quit smoking using language that suggests the presence of some kind of speech difficulty. When he leaves the desk, after requesting some titles from the computer on his behalf, the librarian tells me this patron’s story:

His ‘speech problem’ is related to a mental disability and he lives in a group home, he always reads books about emotions, and doing good deeds, and taking care of people, and when he borrows the books, he leaves the branch and then comes back right away because the books are ‘too hard’ to read. And he often loses books – so all of the reference desk staff know to automatically give him the longer loan period (6 weeks) just when they check them out. “What a soul, he is” the librarian says. She usually requests children’s books for him, because they are simpler for him to understand – “he often comes in and says ‘oh I’ve hurt somebody’s feelings and I feel really badly, what should I do?’ And I will find some books for him to take out – often children’s books.” (SB FN10)

Similar to the previous example, the librarian situates this library client’s information query within a particular informational context informed by an informational empathy which appreciates his particular emotional state, which is directed by her prior experience with him,
and by her knowledge of the library collection to meet his particular informational needs. Although each interaction is often a very small occasion, over time, these informational encounters where interpersonal connections are made, and some level of sensemaking and knowledge sharing occurs, become more substantial and more visible in such a way that at a particular moment the information encounters become a larger information entity, which I define as an information relationship.

It is important to state that all reference encounters or question do not necessarily become information relationships and that all encounters do not necessarily demand information empathy by the library staff members. Information empathy is not always visible or explicit nor is it necessarily present. Sometimes a question appears to be a simple transaction as noted in the typology presented in Chapter Five. However, the observational data gathered in this study contains numerous instances where the librarians connect with their clients’ informational situations using empathy as a means of doing so. Information empathy is a relational dimension warranting focus and definition within the reference practice because it cannot be replicated by technology, because it is usually invisible except to the client and librarian dyad and for that reason, it also resists measurement and objective valuation. Neither information empathy nor information relationships can be triaged. Information empathy is different from physical or interpersonal communication in that it is based on an affective and cognitive informational connection. From the patron’s perspective, “we understand each other better because you can empathize with whatever information I give you in this particular (time-determined) information context” and from the librarian’s perspective, “because I can empathize with your informational situation inferred or explicitly described by you in this moment, we can collaborate more closely in making sense of your information needs and in creating and sharing the knowledge necessary to satisfy this knowledge gap.” Information empathy along with the other aspects of connection outlined here are the raw material offering potential for information relationships.

6.3.4 Reference desk regulars and information relationships
Two types of client-librarian information relationships are observed: one is established and sustained with knowledge objects and organizational routines and the other is based on a person-to-person tacit agreement to ongoing information and knowledge sharing. Both are relationships in the sense that, in both instances, the client and the librarian form information and knowledge centered commitments within this structured space called library. The primary factor which encourages formation of information relationships is over-timeness or
repeated visits between patrons and their reference desk staff members where further questions, further interaction, and further social-informational sharing takes place. This interpretation is supported both by the stories of patrons and reference staff members and by the hours the researcher spent with staff at their reference desks.

In the course of these successive visits to their library branch and information desk, clients become what are known among the staff as library regulars. In turn, each reference desk has its own version of regular staff members. As this librarian defines the species, a regular is someone “who gets to know me and I get to know them” within this specific public space and common ground jointly understood as their public library:

I like just helping people. Not so much here at the main branch but at other branches, probably because it is quieter, you can get more one on one relationship with people, so it’s almost a friendship with certain people. There are a couple of people and it is nice that way as well. … A regular who gets to know me and I get to know them. Friendship might be strong word, but it is more than one on one. It’s not just question and answer. It is a relationship. (MB LIN5)

When asked to describe the regulars, another librarian replies by telling this reference story:

Someone like Mr. G is always doing research of some sort or other. He’s an older fellow, he always has a briefcase that he plunks down on the desk and he likes to talk about chess and pro boxing and wrestling. I served him a year or two ago, I don’t deal with him that much because I am not at the desk nearly as much as the librarians are, but he was going on and on about how he couldn’t get an ice cream soda anymore, like a real soda fountain ice cream soda and he wanted to know about sodas and he wanted me to look it up on the Internet, so I found him a library book and I think he did not expect that there would be a library book. I looked it up and I found it, it was the history of ice cream or soda fountains and he was very impressed. I am sure I got brownie points with him for that. (LBLINT5)

None of the library’s published statistics describes how many regulars URPLO25 counts, nor with what frequency they use the library’s services. However during the elapsed time of between four and six weeks I spent observing at reference desks, I noted many types of regulars by visual identification – patrons who came to the library every day to use the public internet computers or read newspapers, patrons who came every few days with children for materials or a children’s program, patrons who came into the branch weekly or semi-monthly to attend programs, borrow or read materials in-house, and patrons who came to the information desk on two or three separate occasions while I was sitting at the desk. There is no doubt that the URPLO libraries have many clients who use the library more than once and often multiple times weekly, monthly or in other intervals. On the surface, regular use of the library’s spaces, collections and technologies does not necessarily create information

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25 Canadian public library statistics record registered borrowers as the total number of library cards that have been used within the previous two years. The most recent data available (2006) indicates that 34.7% of the population of the city of URPLO were registered borrowers. Library cards are not required for presentation in order to receive assistance at public library reference desks.
relationships between and among clients and the reference staff. However, interpreting such behavioural interactions by these types of regulars sheds light on these relationships in the details.

Reading the newspaper or accessing the internet is a common way clients use public library buildings, collections and services. In this example, a patron at SB branch approaches the reference desk and remains silent. The staff member visually acknowledges the client through eye contact then turns behind the desk, retrieves a section of a newspaper and hands it to this patron. Twenty minutes later the patron returns to the desk with the newspaper in hand, passes it back to the staff member and leaves the branch. No words are exchanged. I witnessed precisely the same interaction on another shift with another staff member at the same desk. When I ask the staff member to explain what has transpired, she notes that Mr. A. is a regular who comes every Saturday to read the paper. Sometime in the past he noted to the staff that the book section was often missing, so the reference staff decided as a group to keep the book section behind the desk where patrons had to ask for it. Mr. A. was advised of this change in the routine and thus he began coming to the desk. Moreover, only the regular reference staff members know Mr. A.’s informational need and this shared knowledge among the reference desk team members and Mr. A. has manifest itself behaviourally as a routinized information relationship. Mr. A. and the particular members of the team have negotiated a shared, tacit, informational commitment. The weekly newspaper serves as the relational information object through which Mr. A. and the library branch staff members are connected. If a casual reference librarian were to encounter Mr. A. at this branch, she would be obliged to interact with Mr. A. with no prior knowledge and in those terms, her encounter with him would be more likely characterized as a transactional encounter as it was defined in the previous chapter. Finally, should Mr. A. move to another branch, he would have to begin a new information relationship with those staff members (Goffman, 1982). Almost certainly the relationship might have different qualities or routines associated with it. This information relationship is silent and only barely visible in the placement of the newspaper section itself behind the desk; it is undocumented in any policies or procedures. It is merely known.

The most common type of information relationship observed is a one to one relationship between a regular client and one or more regular reference desk staff members. In these types of relationships, the client and librarian have shared personal and informational talk over repeated visits, perhaps even over years. It is not always clear how the relationship began, but it is clear that a relationship exists when listening in on their
conversations. However, as with the routinized relationship described earlier, this type of relationship is still more invisible than visible. I cannot see knowing; however if I am present at particular moments, I can hear knowing in their words. What can be understood through the conversation is that some form of connection has been made, and that knowledge of books, or of a particular shared interest or hobby for example, is mutually known and being re-negotiated regularly with more information and knowledge sharing through successive encounters. The shared knowledge originates in the reference encounters, in the exchange of information that can occur in the process of answering a particular question at the reference desk. These relationships are incremental and are highly person dependent. While other members of a reference desk team might be aware of the information relationship because they have also been observers, they are not necessarily themselves participants. These relationships are also undocumented and cannot be named except incidentally through membership on the reference staff team.

Bonnie is a long-time public library client who has raised a family at this library branch and who went back to school to do a post-graduate degree. In the following excerpt she explains a little bit about what her relationships with two staff members in particular is about:

[Wendy and Marlene] know me by name. I know them by name. It’s a real community that you feel a real comfort level in. It’s amazing that more people don’t use it. I think a lot of people do, but it’s just wonderful ….My loyalty is here. I come here because I know the people. That’s part of the reason that draws me here and I have a comfort level here. They know me and I know them and the familiarity is very important.

Interviewer: When you say you know them and they know you, can you tell me a little bit more about what that actually means. What do they know and what do you know?

Well I guess they know my reading tastes. I have had in the past some people point out “You like this book, well you’ll probably like this one too”, which is wonderful. They know my family. We pick up books for each other and things like that, which is really good. It’s just a comfortable thing having that kind of relationship. I know some of them on a more personal level. I know a little bit about their lives. Our children went to the same school and things like that.

Interviewer: Do you talk to them about that here?

Of course, I mean you see them at school and then you see them here and of course you mention that there were things happening at school that you had to see and that type of thing. (SB PINT2)

In this instance, Bonnie has information relationships with both Wendy and Marlene because both staff members have been involved in programming with her children over the years,
and because they have shared experiences outside the library. Sharing book titles and recommendations is a distinct type of reference interaction that can quickly become personal – although library staff members are trained to recommend books, they also bring personal experience to the desk and then build on that experience through sharing reading knowledge and reading or fiction experiences with their information clients. What exactly makes and sustains these information relationships cannot be neatly named nor packaged. In the final analysis, library clients and library staff choose each other in these relationships, based on some sense of connection, and sustain these relationships through social and information talk over repeated visits. It is also important to note that every time Bonnie comes into the library, she does not necessarily explicitly verbalize her connections with Wendy or Marlene. In this way, these information relationships are highly unpredictable, and thus also resistant to a triage system of referral.

These two types of information relationships as they have been characterized – the information relationship that is found in repeated routine interactions between clients and library staff and the more dynamic information relationship that is found in the repeated information talk across the reference desk – share the same unique characteristic of regularity, of being created and sustained invisibly and tacitly over time. They are no less real than the library’s collections, but they are certainly less explicit and measurable.

6.3.5  Knowledge objects as relational props

A library is typically understood first and foremost as a physical or virtual collection of books or other informational objects, organized and made accessible by librarians for designated clients or users.26 The collections of materials are the containers of data with potential meanings known as information and knowledge. As noted in Chapter Two, the compelling and enduring values of a library’s identity are directly related to these knowledge objects. The library’s role as an “informational” place and space explored in a recent study of the Seattle Public Library (Fisher et al, 2007) indicates that whereas passers-by characterized the library as a place to find books or objects, users “more frequently spoke of “information,” “research,” or “knowledge” (Fisher et al, p. 149), other forms of objects used for learning, informing, and gaining wisdom. The URPLO chief executive laments this perception that “books and more books … [are] the only brand we have, that’s the problem…. I have often

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26 According to the Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science, a library is a collection or group of collections of books and/or other print or nonprint materials organized and maintained for use (reading, consultation, study, research, etc.). Institutional libraries, organized to facilitate access by a specific clientele, are staffed by librarians and other personnel trained to provide services to meet user needs.
said when you have almost 10 million items going in and out and you’ve got your whole electronic infrastructure and all of the care and attention that takes, that can take you away from the fact that the art is the interaction with the human being” (MGMT IN#1). She recognizes that while libraries are known by their objects, their art or meanings occur as these objects interact with the human mind through dynamic processes of exploring, informing, researching and knowing.

Whereas there is a temptation to see knowledge objects as somehow substitutes or replacements for this human aspect of information relationships among clients and the reference desk staff, and in the library’s operations more widely, in fact the subject-object-subject relationship cannot be severed so easily or practically. What occurs more frequently is that knowledge objects such as the online catalogue or information services such as Wikipedia and Google displace these human to human interactions and potential relationships. Such displacement can also result in the cognitive perception whereby the computer or the book is seen to answer the question. More accurately, the connection between the librarian and client materializes or is enacted through their shared interaction with the same information object. These interactions can be the first step in the formation of information relationships and while not all interactions lead to relationships, many do.

Knowledge objects are also integral to the provision of reference. They have very specific purposes as both containers and purveyors of information and knowledge, as affiliated “envelopes of meaning” with a social presence as a result of discursive interpretation (Pels, Hetherington & Vandenberghe, 2002, p.5). These material objects may be books, computers, databases, journals, maps, microfilm, finding tools such as the library’s catalogue; they are the preferred “reliable published sources” (Reference and Information Services Guidelines, 2005) staff are trained to use in answering reference questions. They exist in libraries only in so far as they are used by clients and staff; they perform as boundary objects (Bowker & Star, 1999). Their meaning is linked with each human interaction they experience and in this way the library’s knowledge objects are essential enactments of the bricolage of information relationships.

Unlike Mr. A. who is required to approach the library staff members each time he wants to read the particular newspaper section, clients using public internet computers can have similar types of information relationships with reference staff at their service points, but in these cases, the relationships are more indirect. At the small and medium-sized branches where I had clear visual sight of the public internet computers, I observed a handful of the same internet regulars at almost every shift on the desk – morning, afternoon and evening.
These individuals are also known as regulars by the reference staff – their presence is noted at least visually and their occasional absences are also noted.

Some of these regular clients interact with the staff members occasionally to, for example, resolve technical problems with the computers, retrieve printed documents, or get assistance interpreting the information on their computer screens. Using the same workstation every day can be critically important for many of these regulars and in such situations, the clients’ relationships or attachments are more obviously with the knowledge objects (i.e., the computers), than with the staff who enable them. For example, the staff at SB know which computer Mr. W. who comes in each weekday prefers, they know that Mr. W. uses the computer to do his own writing among things, they can tell me that Mr. W. often instructs other users at nearby computers, they note that he moves the mouse and keyboard into a particular position on each visit, and they tell me that they deliberately greet him by name every time he enters the library despite their experience that Mr. W. never verbally returns their greeting. As a researcher at this branch, I observed a number of Mr. W.’s use behaviours. Mr. W. clearly has an informational relationship which entails regularity and attachment to the computer, which he uses for his own informational purposes. However, the human element of the Mr. W.’s relationship is sustained by the physical co-presence, by the common ground of the library, by successive interactions in the space with the computer the information object in the foreground, and the library staff and space in the background.

A client at MB walks by the reference desk from a little distance, smiles, and says to the librarian “unassisted” and continues walking past the desk. The librarian explains to me what this client means by this: “I taught her to use the computer and to set up an e-mail account and this is the first time she’s done it without my help” (MBFN4). In this interaction, the computer is the shared object around which talking, sharing, and learning occurs and which now binds this particular relationship between librarian and client. This relationship remains private, invisible and individual. It endures to the extent to which the client makes successive visits to the library to continue using the public internet computers. If this client ever needs further instruction or assistance she is likely to seek out this librarian who knows her in this informational way and meanwhile she has taken the next step in their relationship by sharing a feeling about her success.

Another way in which knowledge objects support information relationships is specifically around how the library’s online catalogue is used in reference services. Many interactions begin with the activity of searching the library’s catalogue, whether that is done by the librarian only or collaboratively by the client and librarian. In such interactions, the
The confusion about the format as it is indicated on the computer catalog becomes the way into a discussion about “British espionage.” The computer is both a container of information and a social-informational object which facilitates information sharing and relationship. And while a library’s pervasive brand may be “books, books and more books,” these computers and books as objects can also become the material meanings connecting and constituting clients and library staff in information interactions and information relationships of ongoing sensemaking and knowledge sharing.

6.4 Learning, training and reference staff culture

From an organizational perspective, the reference desk can be characterized as a form of epistemic community (Haas, 1992), consisting of dimensions of culture, organizing, routines, knowledge creation and sharing and learning. Unlike communities of practice whose commonality derives from self-identification of a particular shared interest in practice, reference teams in the URPLO branches are organizationally defined, fundamentally sharing the beliefs and values on which librarianship and in particular reference librarianship are based (Gorman, 2001) – stewardship, intellectual freedom, privacy, and equity of access to knowledge and information. Reference staff share URPLO’s institutional values (Appendix
13) which in turn also align with the reference teams’ epistemic values and beliefs. This section will address this research question:

Q3: What role, if any, do the public library (as organization) and the branch library reference unit’s beliefs, values and organizational culture both documented and enacted, play in knowledge sharing and use processes between and among library reference staff and their clients?

The reference staff’s local branch library culture and their particular sensemaking, knowledge sharing, decision making, and learning practices play a significant role in building and sustaining the types of information relationships previously discussed.

An epistemic community is a community or network built on shared knowledge or expertise. These reference teams operate as both departmental units within the library organization and as teams of information experts or specialists who collaboratively manage the provision of information services to their clients in their respective communities. In addition to their individual skills, these teams are equipped by the organization with explicit knowledge systems including administrative policies, information tools and formal training programs to carry out their jobs. The shared or tacit and cultural knowledge of each branch library’s reference group is more inaccessible, intangible, uncoded, and is learned by being present and doing reference, more than by being instructed in a formal setting.

While there is a significant body of explicit knowledge distributed and accessible in the form of library and reference-specific policies, and procedures, each reference department also maintains its own local versions of other policies that also sit in binders on

Making “local” policy
Breaking the rules: In a small branch, they get the rules broken because it’s really hard to know the people as well as we do, and then say no at the same time. Like if they want to pick up their holds for their wife, their son, their brother or whatever, and you know the family and you know there’s nothing wrong with him picking up her holds, but the province says it’s privacy and only the cardholder can, … and some people will be very insistent, the people here have started to say, “oh well, I’ll just do it this one time” and this one time kind of grows. It got to a point where one couple, they’ve got special circumstances OK, we’re understanding. We gave them each a card. They’re the only people I know they each have 2 valid cards and they swap. She carries her card and his card and vice versa!”

The policy to enforce the rules: “Well she always wants us to bend the rules. She wants to pick up videos, primarily videos. … there’s something funny going on there but she always has the card, so that’s fine … But then she’ll want you to renew them, well that’s fine if they can be renewed. But in the past she’s gotten the staff to renew them past when they should, break the rules. So then she realizes ‘oh, if I phone here, I can get a little extra’. And then she’ll phone up and say oh I have some videos on hold can you give me a few extra days? Well usually we would say yes but now she’s abusing that. So we won’t do it for her now.” (SBLINT3)
shelves at each desk. The library’s “Public Services Manual” or “Administrative Procedures” are issued and made available both online and in physical binders. Many branches annotate these procedures according to local information needs and contexts (Figure 6-1. *Administrative Procedures at MB Reference Desk*). According to the staff members at each desk, the organizational binders are very rarely consulted. Their contents are either already known, or their contents are not of enough relevance in the day-to-day; local adaptations of procedures however are more likely to be used but only by occasional staff members to the particular branches.

Figure 6-1: Administrative Procedures at Reference desk

Further, each branch also practices a number of unwritten or tacitly known policies that have been jointly developed by the reference teams over time and both the policies and procedures are always open for further revision as required. The reference staff at LB have evolved their own policy for dealing with this recurring bureaucratic problem. At SB, the staff agree among themselves to “break the rules” in certain instances or conversely to strictly “enforce the rules.” These decisions are taken together through conversation and discussion until a consensus or at least a majority opinion is determined but such decisions are rarely recorded and are instead told through person-to-person talk.

The reference staff at these sites exhibit a keen appreciation in particular for the library value of equity of access to knowledge and information. They want all clients to have the same opportunities for access to information and knowledge through the library’s resources, but at the same time through the development of longer term relationships with both their regulars and their colleagues, they also acknowledge that they are likely to relax some policies for particular patrons according to some criteria which are known and shared
among the team members, but again which are never recorded. In the example noted, both a husband and wife couple are each issued two library cards – one under his name and one under her name to avoid being in conflict with the policy that requires each person to pick up their own book requests using their own library cards. The only way to learn about these information relationships is to be present on repeated occasions, for experiential learning on the desk. As a staff member at SB notes, “it’s really hard to know the people as well as we do, and then say no at the same time” (SB LIN2).

The reference staff are also sensitive to their role as street-level bureaucrats27 who are officially commissioned to serve their clients within a highly structured, explicitly inscribed set of policies and procedures that have as one of their goals, the provision of equitable access of resources. When the patron at SB is seen as “abusing” the staff’s decision to accommodate her video requests, by not limiting the number of such requests she makes, the staff respond by discussing whether or not they should be more stringently “enforcing” the institutional rules, saying, “we might have to cut her off again” (SB FN22). In this way, the local branch staff are acting as very adept bureaucrats who deal with each patron and each information situation with as much flexibility and individual attention as their interpretation of and their sense of authority of the library as institution, enables.

Librarians and library assistants note that they learn how to become street-level bureaucrats through watching their colleagues, and through their experience on the desk. Interpreting policies is different from enforcing policies, and the librarians regularly encounter situations with library clients where they have opportunity to exercise their own judgement, to interpret policy language narrowly or broadly. Knowledge of the organization’s corporate values, of the reference service’s values, and of their own values as professional librarians factors into such interpretive acts. However, as Eric also notes, management is also being

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27 Lipsky’s (1980) original work with social workers introduces the modern dilemma of the front line public servant who is often both a professional with particular expertise and is also a member of a bureaucracy charged with administering or delivering public policy. He characterizes the innate tension street-level bureaucrats and their managers face as “intrinsically conflictual” (p. 25). The role of the street-level bureaucrat is associated with client-processing goals and orientations directed towards maximizing autonomy” whereas managers’ roles are....directed toward aggregate achievement of the work unit and orientations directed toward minimizing autonomy” (p.25). Birdsall (1995) describes the role of the street-level bureaucrat as “providing on the front line a social good and service to the public. The teacher, social worker, and librarian are those government representatives most people meet directly when seeking assistance or service provided by the political system” (p.98). While acknowledging this historical tension Winter (1988) finally concedes that “there will always be bureaucratic forces that do not flow from our own definitions of work, and of course, these forces are mediating forces” (p.53). Thus in this discussion I use this term within this conceptual understanding and without any intended pejorative connotation. Reference librarians and their managers are both professionals and members of their organization-bureaucracy. These structures are both enabling and constraining although along different trajectories.
watched to see how they respond either formally or informally to these street-level acts of shared relational practice. In this way, hierarchy and experience combine to create occasions for retrospective enactment and opportunity for learning; another interpretation is that there is a sense of mutual surveillance and distrust between management and their street-level designates:

One thing is experience and again another thing is definitely watching my colleagues, especially my more experienced colleagues, watching the degree of support from management for certain types of things. Once in a while over the years either myself or a colleague of mine has done something, which I would say was probably correct, but was challenged and we did not get backup from management. I am not doing that again. There was a policy about not eating around the computers so I would occasionally sanction someone for that and they went to a manager and the manager said “whatever you want”. So basically it is a response to an interpretation by someone senior to me so I use that as a cue. That works both ways. It works in the sense that they may be more liberal than what I was thinking or the other way around. It’s reactive because you only find out after, but I do feel comfortable doing that on any basis. (LB LIN2)

In addition to or perhaps regardless of the explicit policies, team members clearly engage in ongoing co-constitution of their meanings through observation, sensemaking and knowledge sharing, building on the array of expertise already at work in their particular epistemic community.

The URPLO organization provides all reference staff members with formal training described variously by these representative voices from the library’s organization. URPLO’s senior executives, from the chief executive to the reference manager, all refer to training in formal, objectivist or outcome-based terms, such as getting answers to questions, or acquiring and using the latest tools, and the latest technologies. The Reference and Information Services Guidelines (RISG), approved by the Library’s senior management, articulate a reference philosophy, service parameters and guidelines and serve as the desk staff’s policy tool for information services. The purpose of the document is to prescribe standards and to encourage more consistency, across all information desks and locations in the organization. The managers describe their approach to staff training for this service, in these ways:

Chief Executive Officer: “It might be a review of the tools, it might be a review of the questions. Someone could work up a review of the questions and answers over the certain period of time and then ask did we do our best? Maybe there is a way of carrying the review knowledge back into the learning process. Lots of the staff tell me they want more training on the data bases so they can be better at providing answers. A lot of the training that you get on the job is extremely valuable, but sometimes you should get into the classroom with a slightly more formal approach where you are not being grabbed by someone at the desk every 2 minutes to answer a question.”
Senior Manager – Strategy: “Once you've got folks there, insuring appropriate training to make sure that folks are up to speed on the latest tools, the latest technologies, providing opportunities for them to meet with their peers in the institutional setting, but also being able to go out to conferences and meet with peers elsewhere to find out about what's happening in your specific area, to find out what the similarities and differences are …. The other model that was really sharp was at the [large city] public library, where, in their cluster they had the librarians rotate from branch to branch on cycles. You could stay within a community for 6 months, got to know what was going on there and developed some services for them, you were then able to bring that expertise to the next community and so on, so it gave you a broader sense of what was going on…. What we can do is ensure that there is a core level of things that are reviewed and use skill testers at the end to see if they have grasped and understand, but from there it is a partnership. You have to take it on yourself and see what else you can learn.”

Reference Service Manager: “We've asked people to use them [the Reference & Information Services Guidelines] for training, but there is some training that takes place, we are working on trying to do more when there are new hires, ensuring that they run through a mini program at the main library, mostly to try and ensure a bit more consistency, but by and large the new staff get trained in the location in which they are going to work, for all aspects of their job and I think that is something we are looking at changing because I have asked people to ensure that everybody not only receives a copy of these guidelines, but they go over them with them and they understand them and they understand what the implication of them is.” (MGMT LIN1,2 & 4)

The senior manager for strategy describes her wish list for training involving conferences, peer to peer training, and staff rotations, ideas he has gathered from other libraries in North America. While recognizing some value in on-the-job-training, the chief executive would like a “more formal approach” that is “classroom” based. When asked to describe what training is offered, the reference manager talks about training staff on using these Guidelines and on the opportunity for ensuring consistent quality of service at all service points. The Guidelines define what is meant by the service: “reference service includes both providing customers with the information and assisting customers to locate information.” Information is characterized as the desired object of and purpose for all information desk work in this public library; information is defined as that which is “provided only from reliable published sources, whether print or electronic” regardless of the staff member’s personal knowledge or experience.

These interview excerpts from the front-line reference desk respondents suggest that they prefer and enact a different approach to “formal” or “classroom” oriented learning. Beginning with the team leader who notes the place for formal learning as an introduction to the work, the librarian and library assistants note the importance of their colleagues – as other experts, as people with whom they can re-enact some of the difficult questions, as partners discussing looking for other ideas to improve their answers. In one branch the library assistant names the tacit policy she and her colleagues have worked out through
their shared time together - the permission to “butt in.” At the desks, transaction oriented training for transaction oriented information work becomes more of an ongoing practice of self-directed learning:

Reference Team Leader: The formal learning is a staff member comes from the outside and they will get about 15 hours of training with me and the other members of my staff and then they are put on an information desk and for the first 4 months they are never alone so they always have people to call upon. (LBINT2)

Librarian: Whenever I am at a desk, whatever I am doing and my colleague is working with a client, I always have an ear open. I really open up my awareness to physical surroundings, to people around, I may not see everything, but I am open and so I am listening, not eavesdropping, so I pick up on things. (LBLINT1)

Library Assistant: Well some of it, I was going to say training first and foremost, but some of it is also, you know Hannah is the reference librarian, so it’s often just asking her questions. Someone comes in and asks me a question, I do the best I can to answer it. Sometimes I call a larger branch or the main library and see if I can find out, but then I’ll save that question in my head and next time I see her I’ll ask her or I’ll ask a colleague and say ‘this is how I approached the question, would you have done it a different way?’ I’ll often ask them if there’s something I’m missing. So often it’s talking to co-workers. (SBLINT3)

Library Assistant: We’ve all given each other permission to ‘butt in’ … – if somebody hears me running through a bunch of different possibilities and we’re not coming up with much but they looked it up for somebody just the other day, we’ve all given each other permission to say, “oh I know who that is … it might be … It’s just informal. When I first came on it was ‘if you have happen to have something to add, feel free to jump in. (PBLINT2)

Librarian: You kind of know where people’s strengths are. Mark is a reference librarian he knows the reference collection, he knows the adult collection, he does the reading for it so you know his strength. Mary, she’s a mystery person so if it’s a mystery question, like you know people’s strengths. (SBLINT3)

Referral to larger branches with more knowledgeable specialists is also recommended in the Guidelines. In an analysis of 480 interactions at three reference desks, however, I observed reference staff consulting and making referrals only to their colleagues in their own branches. Although the differences in approach between management and the front-line staff highlighted here are not radically opposed, and even if we accept that all training is theoretically useful to some degree, observational data describe a different phenomenon and that is that staff behave differently. Reference desk staff regularly acknowledge the overwhelming importance of their peers; they see and then come to know many types of expertise among their co-workers. Such an approach to knowledge sharing and learning in their day to day work appears to make some type of difference to the clients and their information interactions and relationships discussed in this chapter.

Each reference desk has its own habits and routines for communicating with their team members, for interpreting policies and procedures, or for dealing with problem
situations such as difficult patrons and for knowledge sharing and learning about information questions and resources more specifically. There is an acknowledgement of the value of experience as it is represented by hours on the desk, or years of service. Time brings more experience and more experience transforms into knowledge when applied. This approach to reference practice is described by this librarian in a small understanding that his team has introduced to interpret the cardholder’s access policy:

Experience gets filtered through an interpretation and then becomes knowledge … it includes interpretation of others and you make a judgment that’s worth something, that’s of value. That can be talked about between colleagues. For example, something like best practice of something or other. A very mundane example is sometimes we get asked to look up library card numbers, so we have an agreement amongst ourselves that the first question we ask for is photo ID, and if they can’t supply that then the door closes. Nobody told us that, but that is the best thing to do because it’s a confidential number. (MB LIN2).

Behavioural and informational norms at the reference desk sites offer clues to the characteristics of that particular branch culture and to the ways that the reference staff make sense of their work as an epistemic collective. For example, at SB, in answering reference questions, only in a very few occasions do staff use the Internet as an information resource, whereas at MB and LB, it was very clearly the case that the web was seen as another information source in the repertoire. When asked why it is not used more often at SB, one staff member’s answer is that “Sometimes I feel like I don’t see other people doing that, so I am not sure whether that is book related enough. I have this thing in my head that it is just about the sources in the library” (SB LIN2). In contrast, at MB, the librarian most frequently on the desk often moved users to the public internet computers and engaged in one-on-one instruction with the clients to help them both answer their question and to instruct them on how to use the computer catalogue enabling them to serve themselves in future interactions. These approaches to answering questions and instructing patrons are distinct and the differences can be observed over time at each location.

In sum, the culture of the reference desk at these URPLO branches reflects the values of learning, knowledge sharing, respect for individual expertise, trust, and openness.
Reference teams provide service which is mutually constituted and open to staff-client relationship building even when they are not necessarily meeting the bureaucratic expectations defined through norms, standards, or observable, consistent behaviours. Each branch also has some unique norms and behaviours for achieving the institutional and reference service values. The library organization has a more object-centered approach to designing learning whereby skills and competencies are achieved in training programs, and where learning is transferred from location to location through regular staff rotation. The reference teams themselves, however, know that they are always in perpetual states of unknowing; they are constantly organizing and re-organizing themselves and their supporting knowledge objects so that they are ready for the next person, or the potential next information relationship to present itself at their service desk. These street-level staff practices illustrate well that "learning cannot be designed: it can only be designed for – that is, facilitated or frustrated" (Wenger, 1998, p.229). Management, reference clients and individual staff members each plays a role in this shared learning.

6.5 Conclusion, chapter summary and key findings

Information relationship, particular local branch cultures, staff-client connection through information empathy, their relational uses of the library’s knowledge objects, their previous shared experiences, shared knowledge, shared sensemaking or knowledge creation - none of these human to human connections is visible, or documented, or measurable in objectivist terms. The reference service in this public library is made up of many larger and smaller interactions and information relationships that have occurred and continue to occur over time; this service cannot be accurately characterized as the sum of its transactions and interactions rationally coordinated through a triage-designed, expert referral system, no matter how effective such a system might appear to be.

The lived experience of the reference desk is depicted in these relationship stories – human experiences consisting of improvisation, unpredictability, affective reactions and shared library values of informing, knowing, and from the reference staff, service to the larger community. Moreover, as the data in this chapter further suggest, relational interactions are embedded in the common space/place and shared identity of library and are sustained uniquely through staff-client connections that may range from the simplest regular eye contact to explicit, expressive information empathy over years, of back and forth talk across the desk boundary. This shared understanding of reference is also constantly being
tested, contested, negotiated, and affirmed in these conversations, encounters, and observations.

Thus, reference service at this public library is evolving in a much more open-ended way than any observer or bureaucrat might be able to discern from more distance. The focus of the service is much less about the distribution or accessibility of knowledge objects, and much more about the human to human information and knowledge connection being sought. Staff within these services know and take responsibility for their membership in their relational practice. Although strictly economic imperatives for changing the service are hinted at – in management’s push for staff efficiencies, in their wish for formalized and unitized training, and in their political environment where performance and quality improvement are seen and reported on, only at the smallest unit or transactional level – managing only by such an objectivist perspective is inaccurate and incomplete.

The results discussed in this chapter suggest several core findings about the public library’s reference service from the perspectives of knowledge sharing and learning. These findings respond to research questions Q#2 and Q#3:

Q2: What is the nature of the knowledge sharing and use processes that occur between and among library staff and library clients’ reference service and adjacent public spaces in an urban library branch?

Q3: What role, if any, do the public library (as organization) and the branch library reference unit’s beliefs, values and organizational culture both documented and enacted, play in knowledge sharing and use processes between and among library reference staff and their clients?

Building on the results of Chapter Five where a typology of reference encounters was characterized along three dimensions of information exchange, interpersonal communication and mode of behaviour, I have characterized the full range of reference service from relational and ‘practice’ perspectives. The core elements of this practice are: a) reference interactions (as discussed in Chapter Five); b) the social, informational and learning relationships both between staff and clients in their human-to-human interactions and among the reference staff teams themselves; and c) the library’s collections of knowledge objects including library spaces, information and communication technologies and information resources. These elements of the reference activity are unique in being situated within the structure of d) the library as place/space which notion encompasses the library’s institutional identity, its values and beliefs, its culture, and its structural-organizational properties. The major findings from this chapter can thus be summarized as follows:
1) To recognize the activities taking place beyond the narrowly defined reference transaction, is to recognize the often private, invisible, relationally rich and nuanced social and informational qualities of the public library’s reference service. These activities can most accurately be characterized as a relational practice occurring at the library’s street-level organizational and institutional space/place boundary where reference service clients and staff individually and collectively enact their knowledge and information sharing activities over time.

2) The public library’s reference practice is constituted in part by the formation of boundary social-informational relationships characterized in these ways as:
   - successive librarian-client interactions over time;
   - occurring in the context of ‘library’ as space/place;
   - with the potential of having affective, informational and social relational attributes; and
   - negotiated using knowledge objects and subjects.

3) Information empathy, understood as the reference staff and patrons’ mutual abilities to affectively connect with each other specifically through information sharing in their reference interactions and information relationships, can be differentiated from other more traditional aspects of interpersonal communication processes such as affinity, commitment and connection. Information empathy is a form of interpersonal connection grounded in the process of information and knowledge sharing.

4) Reference staff evolve their non-routine or tacit and dynamic aspects of their particular local practices through individual and collective experiences of observation, enactment and cultural knowing, among their colleagues.

Because the library’s identity as an institution evolves from a distinguishing and historical set of informational and democratic public values (Gorman, 2000), because the library is a singular public space providing individual opportunity for lifelong learning using information and knowledge resources, and for acts of informing and knowing, the quality of the relationships and interactions that take place within this common ground is also singular. Taken as a whole, and more than the sum of these individual dimensions discussed here,
these aspects of human interaction around the public library reference desk constitute what is defined as the “reference practice.”

In the subsequent discussion and conclusions to this study, some theoretical assertions will be presented depicting the public library’s reference service as a core epistemic practice that both enables the library as organization to build stronger economic and political arguments and perhaps more importantly which also raises our eyes from a unitized, commercial view of library to a more accurate and more complete view of library and specifically the reference service as an epistemic practice.

In Chapter Seven I will present findings from Chapters Five and Six, in a revised conceptual framework identifying the library as institution and organizational structure, the reference service as a social-theoretical practice, and the individual clients and staff members as human agents located within the knowledge society as the larger context. This framework will interpret the public library’s reference service from the perspective of an epistemic practice using theoretical notions of structure, agency (Giddens, 1984) and practice (Barnes, 2001; Knorr-Cetina, 1997, 1999; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001).
Chapter Seven

Reference service as everyday epistemic practice & conclusion

This chapter concludes this study by shifting from data analysis and interpretation to a discussion of the study findings developed in Chapters Five and Six. In Chapter Five, 480 reference transactions were analyzed and re-interpreted as client-librarian reference interactions using a typology with three major dimensions and related characteristics – information exchange, interpersonal communication and mode of behaviour. These interactions were then re-interpreted within a wider framework of relational reference work in Chapter Six using social-relational dimensions of common ground of the library as place/space, information empathy, information relationships, objects as relational props and sensemaking, knowledge and learning processes as they are enacted over time. To conclude the study, reference service is presented in a particular theoretical frame – a possible alternative to the transactional interpretation – as an epistemic practice being reproduced within the larger field of the knowledge society. This practice reproduces itself in the duality of the library as institutional public structure and the reference staff and client-agents at the organizational boundary.

Before articulating this conceptual framework, it is important to underscore that this study is merely one “case” of reference practice in one library over one fixed period of time. Findings finally cannot be generalized from such interpretations – they can only be challenged for their internal consistency, trustworthiness, and overall soundness. And thus any framework enunciated on this basis is subject to the same limitations. The following framework is an immediate or local theoretical response to these data and findings specifically as they originate in this library organization and community, regardless of how abstract the concepts and language used to describe this perspective.

As a conceptual framework this notion of epistemic practice integrates the library as organization with the individual library clients and staff at the street-level organizational boundary ontologically in practice and thus it also offers an opportunity for greater epistemological completeness responding to the following discussion question:

*What are the essential dimensions of current public library reference service and how should these be organized to enable the library to evolve and change as a knowing organization in the context of the “knowledge society”?*
The response to this question is an articulation of a practice-based approach to the reference service, more specifically describing public library reference service as an epistemic practice where reference clients and staff together engage in sensemaking, knowledge creation, sharing and learning. This practice is co-constituted through the interaction of these social entities: the library’s knowledge objects, the library as institutional structure, and the reference staff and client agents or subjects. Such a theoretical lens is in sharp relief to the current perspective with its distinctly market-based, objectivist approach to designing and delivering library services. This chapter will conclude with a summary of main findings, and with some reflections on this study’s contribution, its limitations and on directions public libraries might take if they choose to incorporate elements of such a practice-based approach into the design and delivery of their services within the knowledge society.

7.1 A conceptual framework of the public library reference service as epistemic practice

In Chapter Six I defined the reference desk practice as an ongoing series of habitual performances conducted interactionally by clients and reference staff. Practice referred to behaviours I observed by reference staff and their clients. In assuming a more theoretical lens for interpretation of these study findings I adopt this more abstract definition and understanding of practice as: the “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001, p.2). Practice promotes a distinct “social ontology” where the “social is [the] field” (p.4) of activity. The field of practices includes components or phenomena such as “knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation” (p.2). Further, practice as it is conceived in this definition “contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals, (inter)actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, institution/roles, structures, or systems in defining the social” (Schatzi, 2001, p.3). I interpret reference work as a particular type of practice – as epistemic, or in other words, as a practice of finding meaning through knowing and learning.

Epistemic practice is defined by its creative and constructive acts, by its relational rather than performative structure, by the significance of its relationship with epistemic objects, by a “structure of wanting” (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p. 186) and by its potential to create “communities in thought” (Knorr-Cetina, 1997, p. 24). So whereas other notions of practice tend to emphasize the habitual or routine aspects (Giddens, 1984), an epistemic practice can be characterized more distinctively and only provisionally, in these key ways:
• agents are individually and collectively oriented towards ongoing learning;
• material objects play a significant role in co-constitution;

From these study findings the reference service emerges as not only a series of interactions where questions are asked and answered; nor are they only information relationships built over time and the common ground of the library place/space. More accurately, as depicted in Figure 7-1: *Conceptual framework of reference service as epistemic practice*, reference service is an epistemic practice organized around these dimensions – structure, agency, objects – which are co-constituted and constantly evolving together in an “epistemic practice” in particular and unique ways such as through reference interactions and information relationships for example. In such a practice, shared learning through knowledge processes such as sensemaking, knowledge creation and sharing, with an emphasis on experience over cognition or structured learning are preferred. Objects take on a larger importance as they are imbued with their own material aspects of knowledge and learning, and as figures in this relational practice.

Figure 7-1. Conceptual framework of reference service as epistemic practice

In this interpretation, reference service as epistemic practice is irreducible ontologically – it is its own array of activities which are more than the sum of agency, structure and objects. In
the subsequent discussion, these elements and the characteristics of epistemic practice will be interpreted from this perspective.

7. 1.1 Structure and agency as theoretical markers

Sharing some ontological common ground with the idea of “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977), structuration theory (Giddens, 1979; 1984) recognizes that the social world is in a constant state of being co-constituted or reproduced by our human agency as we interact with the social structures in our worlds. Structuration overcomes the historical either/or dualism of society and individual; instead, one of its major contributions is in giving us a way to talk about the inseparability or duality of these social entities. Giddens’ (1984) theory of social organization has inspired various interpretations and applications in a wide range of social practice and information systems research in part because it can be applied at both the micro and macro-social levels to understand many types of social processes simultaneously (Jones & Karsten, 2008). For these reasons, “structure” and “agency” introduce the discussion of reference service as epistemic practice. In the context of this study, the library is characterized as the institutional structure and the reference staff and clients as the human agents each playing their parts in the collective practice.

The concepts of structure and agency are particularly useful for interpreting how the reference practice is enacted within the public library as organization because they are sufficiently abstract and at the same time meaningful for understanding this interactional tension. In Giddens’ (1984) terms, structure has aspects of signification, authority and domination where the library as organization acts as the single, legitimate authority for the members of the reference service. Structures are differentiated by their social properties such as norms, meanings, and power relationships and are virtual or invisible as a consequence. Theoretically, structures cannot be seen but can only be discerned in action with their agent-participants. Defined as “rules and resources, organized as properties of social systems” (Giddens, 1984, p.25) structure is both enabling and constraining. These routines or rules inscribed in structures are continuously and mutually reproduced through human agency. We could say that the library patrons and the library as organization co-constitute library values such as the value of equitable access to information at the reference desk; and we could further say that the reference staff in each branch co-constitute their own local reference and information service routines and habits with their regular patrons in the day to day interactions. We could say that public library’s history is
itself a structure instantiated across time-space in a tradition of making books and information available for loan to its community's citizenry.

The agent in this duality participates voluntarily, is highly autonomous and knowledgeable about her own actions. Agents constantly interact with the social structures with multiple levels of awareness including through their “practical consciousness,” an important characteristic of human agency and a leading theme of structuration theory according to Giddens (1984, p.xxiii). Practical consciousness “consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression” (p.xxiii). Through this sense of knowableability, individuals are able to enact or reproduce their social actions, although they might not necessarily be discursively capable of articulating or enunciating why they know what they know. In this sense, “practical consciousness” is a form of tacit knowledge. Because agents are regarded as actively capable, power is also understood to be mutually available – individuals can exercise their own power alongside power manifest by structurally imposed enablers and constraints.

Structures and agents are mutually bound by time-space distances and because of these limitations research in this area often requires ethnographic approaches to capture interactions in the moments. The structure of the increasingly accessible asynchronous digital reference service available through e-mail or other electronic means may affect superficially what these relationships look like and how this particular practice is formed, but ultimately the same actors - structure, human agents and objects - are present and are in some relationship of interdependence. Most everyday actions or social practices are routinized and are thus seen as more stable over time, which, it is held, is reassuring to the actors engaged with these structures. From this perspective, library clients and reference desk staff would be understood to like or value the structure of the reference practice or other library services’ routines because these routines offer a sense of continuity and reliability to the social lives of these clients. Reference clients can count on the library being open, the regular staff being present, and a host of other social and informational routines or habits being available for their engagement. Finally, the actors in such structure-agency relations can only ever partially describe and understand their actions because they are limited by their own situatedness in time-space-relationship to this particular structure.

Giddens’ (1984) notion of structure is characterized more formally by its rules and routines insofar as these rules are the “structuring properties allowing the ‘binding’ of time-space in social systems" (p.17). "Structure" is different from social "structures" which are
more familiar to us as enactments or applications or manifestations of the theoretical concept, “structure.” As Giddens further notes, “the most important aspects of structure are rules and resources recursively involved in institutions. Institutions by definition are “those practices which have the greatest time-space extension” (p.17) and “with the more enduring features of social life …. giving solidity across time and space” (p.24). As structure has been applied, there is less emphasis on the open and uncontested aspect of routines, despite their constant enactment through human agency. Structure is thus both the medium and the outcome of practice. The public library in North America is its own unique institutional structure in these terms because historically it has existed only insofar as it carried out its core mission to provide citizens with access to information resources broadly interpreted; and it is recognized structurally as a library because of its ongoing reproduction of these activities. Were the mission of the public library to change dramatically such that it stopped providing access to information resources and instead perhaps became more absolutely a public space for interaction, we might begin to think about whether that new entity was in fact a library, or whether our notion of library needed to be altered significantly.

With its emphasis on the process of co-constitution structuration theory is typically appreciated for understanding structures as habitual human-social systems, and less specifically about how we may learn socially. In this way, structure is more closed or bounded; learning is more narrowly defined as that which is reproduced into routines and habits by structure-agentic interactions. Further, this duality addresses activity at the individual level as these individuals engage with various social structures; group or collective agency beyond the sum of the individuals is noted as an accumulation of individual actions. Agency-structure concepts are useful for differentiating roles among clients, reference staff, management policies and the library as organization. In interpreting the shared knowledge and information processes that are enacted together by the reference librarians and their clients and for understanding the role of knowledge objects in these interactions, structuration as a theory of practice is still insufficient. Nevertheless, the concepts of agency and structure and their inter-relationship provide two important conceptual anchors for understanding reference service as epistemic practice. A brief overview of the key theoretical aspects of “practice” follows building on this overview of structure and agency; finally a discussion of objects and learning as essential features of epistemic practice completes this conceptual framework.
7.1.2 Dimensions of practice in the context of the library

Theoretical analyses of shared processes or collective action within social systems are more commonly characterized as practice theory\(^\text{28}\) (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, von Savigny, 2001) which acknowledges the contributions of Giddens and Bourdieu among others, when one is tracing its social theoretical provenance. Practice theory as it is more recently being conceptualized by sociologists (Latour, 2005; Schatzki, et al, 2001) offers a rich and robust vocabulary and form for understanding the social site of the reference desk within the public library organization. Taking a practice-based approach privileges the shared or interactive activities as an entirety and as they enact the structure-agency duality of library organization and staff-clients agents; this approach is also finally a more accurate interpretation of the findings from the previous chapters. Unlike rational or propositional theory originating in science domains, practice theory extends its scope to include in addition, “typologies of social phenomena; models of social affairs accounts of what social things are; conceptual frameworks developed expressly for depicting sociality” (Schatzki et al, 2001, p.4). The concept of practice inherently contains the social; in this understanding all practices are essentially shared.

There are several dimensions of practice theory suggested by this definition of practice as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki et al, 2001, p.2) that are central and particularly significant to an understanding of the reference desk as practice. Practices are embodied, meaning that all practices involve understandings and meanings coming from our bodies and their physical properties. At their most generic level, all practices are structured clusters or “arrays” of shared human activity. Simply physically being in the world is itself a social activity where being has many layers of meaning. Our bodies are constituted through our social interactions. For example, our bodies learn certain habits and routines associated with libraries such as lowering our voices, or learning how to share and negotiate public

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\(^{28}\) The term “practice theory” in this chapter draws most directly from the theoretical orientation insofar as it is defined and discussed in The practice turn in contemporary theory (Schatzi, Knorr-Cetina, von Savigny, 2001) and from the work of Bourdieu (1977) Giddens (1984) and Latour (2005). In his “Introduction – practice theory” Schatzi (2001) explains how practice theory links to philosophical practice, social and cultural theory and the study of science and technology. He explains further that the definition of theory is a departure from the more scientific approach, but that practice theory includes “typologies of social phenomena; models of social affairs; accounts of what social things (e.g., practices, institutions) are; conceptual frameworks developed expressly for depicting sociality; and descriptions of social life – so long as they are couched in general, abstract terms” (p.4). It is following from this theoretical line that the conceptual framework of reference service as epistemic practice is presented.
spaces. For practice theorists, being is only social and the world is found in any and all types of social systems or structures. We continuously participate in the social domain and we embody all of these experiences of participation.

Practices also rest “centrally on the successful inculcation of shared embodied know-how” (Schatzki, 2001, p.3). Along this boundary of shared versus individual “know-how” and action, practice theorists adopt a collectivist approach which requires that we understand not simply how a host of individuals responds to a social field or structure. Instead individuals in practice are “oriented to each other” (Schatzki, 2001, p.3). The difference can be seen in how a team might function in context – sharing a larger goal, but working together to achieve it, rather than working individually all towards the same end. In this former case, the “know-how” of the collective is more than the sum of the individuals (Barnes, 2001) where the routines of the shared practice may even be unknowable by individual members of the same practice. This is not to say that individuals cannot participate in social practices, but that their participation is really only ever part of a larger social entity. The reference librarian and reference client arguably each brings their orientation from their respective collectives (all reference librarians and all reference clients) to each interaction. For example, the librarian may bring a cultural orientation around equity of access or privacy or she may be habituated to the reference interview in a particular way that is unique and visible only at the collective level. Similarly the reference desk staff as a unified entity develops responses to particular client information situations.

In this study the reference desks at URPLO are staffed by both librarians and library assistants – information professionals and paraprofessionals. While this study did not attempt to assess differences in behaviour and reference practice between these two groups, potential for differences in knowledge, learning and communication skills must be acknowledged. Such differences might be observed across individual branch library locations. Whether officially differentiated by educational qualification or by other means, library reference staff are simultaneously individuals, members of their professional “practice of librarianship” and members of their local library’s team or collective. Moreover, it is clearly evident that individual library staff members have individual relationships with clients and with co-workers. They have biases, expertises, preferences, styles and habits which are individually their own and which also make up a portion of this larger “desk” practice. Understanding which aspects of reference desk activities are informed by professional or by local influences and structures would invite another kind of study than the present one.
Knowledge and knowing are also embedded in practice – but unlike a structurationist view which suggests that knowing exists in the agent’s mind as it engages with structure, the practice view sees knowing as only present in the shared-ness of the people and their arrangements in the world. Practice, therefore is seen to “displace” mind as “the central phenomenon of human life” (Schatzki, 2001, pp.11-12). This shift of practices to the foreground is another critical and distinguishing characteristic of practice theory which is particularly visible in the reference desk practice of the public library. Librarians and clients engage in many types of interactions and activities which together constitute the reference as practice, but the most basic activity upon which this practice is constructed is the client-librarian information query and interaction across the reference desk as organizational and informational boundary. The client and the librarian together resolve the particular information problem or gap and in doing so enact various knowings or shared routinized knowledge, whether such knowledge is of the library as information structure, of the reference routines, or knowledge simply about each other in this particular informational context.

In Chapter Five I characterized these reference encounters into four typologies; each type of encounter (social, interactional, transactional and systematic) is its own micro-practice. The client’s know-how entails understanding the structure and dynamics of asking and the librarian’s know-how may involve their similarly and tacitly known approach to hearing the question, but only together within this social field of library does the reference activity occur. Within just that single dynamic interaction we can see evidence of practice theory in action. Over time and space these smaller practices become activities in a larger social and epistemic practice.

Because practices are seen as the prime or ordinal structures governing social action, these practices are also understood as instantiating social order and organization. An ordered practice possesses a meaning and identity. Schatzki (2001) describes this order as the “understandings, rules and teleoaffectivity” (p.7) of practice. The reference practice continually structures or arranges itself through its participants in some relationship we understand as a library’s information service; it is also an ordered practice with “rules” as it is specifically defined (Ross, Nilsen et al, 2002) and having a series of distinct steps which entail a beginning and an end. Reference librarians and clients together share an emotional commitment to the goal of resolving information gaps and reducing their uncertainty. But just as practices conjure and confer order, they also conjure and confer disorder, uncertainty and unknowing in their open-endedness. Practices are constantly being enacted, and thus
are also constantly changing and unresolved. We never know what the next question will be nor where or how it will take us. Reference librarians in the URPLO libraries cannot know how their structures will be changed by the intersection of new information technologies and their clients' changing needs. Clients cannot know how their library and its services will evolve over time because no one of those clients will be individually responsible for such change. All of these virtually certain changes will come over time and through social practice. And at the precise points or moments where these tensions between order and uncertainty are rendered visible, practiced and explicit, we have the greatest opportunity to learn about ourselves and the social worlds we constitute in this practice of public library reference service.

In as much as we can understand the reference desk as a practice in these conceptual terms briefly described, additional theoretical reflection on the reference service as a knowledge and learning-centered practice within the context of the library as organization can further strengthen this preliminary interpretation. Although practice theory addresses the role of knowledge in creating and sustaining social activities, knowledge in this context is primarily embedded in routines and embodied in habits. In sustaining order in this practice, such routines become normative and performative. And given this emphasis, a related question arises – how and why do practices evolve and change? How do practices resist stasis and institutionalization while still retaining meaningful structure and order? Where can library users look for hints about the future of this core library service? There are many possible ways to approach these questions. Structure, agency and practice have been introduced as conceptual markers in my ethnographic field. I now foreground “epistemic practice” (Knorr-Cetina, 1997; 1999; 2001) because learning, knowing, object and relational processes are finally what makes the reference service the library’s own real-world social knowledge practice.

7.1.3 Objects and learning as epistemic features of practice
Having introduced agency, structure and practice with both theoretical and applied interpretations in the context of the public library’s reference service, I will now bind these concepts together into a single lens, provisionally defined as an (everyday) epistemic practice. The significant role of knowledge objects to these human-agent interactions and a distinctive orientation towards open-ended, contested, and relational learning constitute the ‘epistemic’ characteristics of this single conceptual framework and complete the characterization. Following a brief overview of these elements, this discussion will conclude
with a summary that draws all of these elements – agency, structure, objects and epistemic practice – as they have been discussed from the organizational perspective of the real-world library and from the theoretical perspective of an epistemic practice into this single unified lens.

That practices are materially mediated also makes them manifest or more visible; that is, we can see practices in action when we can see agentic interactions with knowledge objects such as books or information technologies such as the library’s catalogue. While differences remain in where interpretive emphasis is given (human or object), practices are intersections of such material-human activity (Schatzki, 2001, p.11). Being material in this context is best signified as object and non-human, although as Suchman (2005) describes even objects have “affiliative powers” which makes them “not innocent but fraught with significance for the relations that they materialize” (Suchman, 2005, p. 379). These subject-object relationships of practice are constituted in human-object interactions, and moreover objects are highly contextual and are often only understood through relationship with their subject or human agents (Turkle, 2007). The information systems which are often designed as substitutes for human interaction in the public library setting, actually function more precisely as mediating knowledge objects. Whereas the scientist’s nexus of practice may be mediated through formulae or design specifications or an invisible protein (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), the reference client mediates her information practice through the library’s “array” of information resources, notably the online library catalogue, but also including the reference librarian.

There is a tendency to speak of knowledge objects in our everyday use of the library as separate and distinct or unrelated to ourselves as agents in this epistemic practice. However such an orientation is limited and incomplete because subjects affiliate or interact with their objects, and their meanings are located in interaction with the clients not in the object itself. For example the library catalogue is meaningful because users and library staff alike generally understand and draw basic or more sophisticated meaning from its structure; users and librarians also participate in its creation and ongoing enactment as it is a source of contested and often negotiated knowledge about the organization of and access to the library’s collections. The meaning of the catalogue changes as it is used in the epistemic practice of reference. Library objects themselves do not have any residual meaning, although we often make that mistake (through synecdoche or personification). Nor are objects representatives of their subjects, although as noted earlier, they can be used as relational props or tools to connect the reference librarian and her information client. The
reference practice finally is most accurately characterized a human-object-human nexus, not simply a human-human or human-object interaction. Knowledge objects are often contested and negotiated elements of this larger epistemic practice. For example, library collections of information databases, websites, or internet-based socially constructed information tools such as Wikipedia can become the foci for knowledge sharing or conversely, knowledge debate and disagreement. Whether objects or agents appear directly in the foreground or are more indirectly implied in the contextual background of the client-reference staff encounters and information relationships is unpredictable and can change repeatedly. What we know, however is that clients, knowledge objects and library staff are nevertheless co-constituted in virtually all reference encounters. Resolving the information or knowledge gap happens in the shared activity of what we understand as the reference interview.

An epistemic practice differs from other types of practice by its emphasis on what we do not know instead of on knowledge we have which is “overly cognitively tilted” (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p. 186); in the former instance, knowledge is experiential, arousing our affective or libidinal and relational capacities and sensibilities. In contrast to the knowledge embodied or absorbed into routines, relational knowledge calls upon the relentless wanting we experience when engaging with epistemic objects such as books. In library terms, information resources and collections of discrete items in an array of formats – print, audio-visual, digital - are the primary epistemic objects with which library staff and clients interact. Knowledge objects “differ from commodities, instruments and everyday things” as they are defined by their “lack of completeness of being and their non-identity with themselves” (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p.176). As they are objects of semi-structured ideas, books could be characterized as quintessential knowledge objects because they are only partial or incomplete entities. The domain of reader-response theory and its application in LIS studies particularly in readers’ advisory work also suggests this type of incompleteness is present for both readers and their knowledge objects such as books (C.S. Ross in Fisher et al, 2005). To be momentarily completed, books and other types of information and knowledge objects need readers, listeners and viewers. The successive readers, listeners and viewers of a public library’s lending collections of knowledge objects, then, are members of this ongoing, unresolved epistemic practice which is uniquely a practice of the public library.

This conceptualization of epistemic practice originates in studies from the perspective of expert subject communities (Knorr-Cetina, 1999); nevertheless, the notion is also relevant for library communities. The subjects of the library and reference service practices are both expert and non-expert or everyday participants. In a knowledge society,
the argument is made that we are increasingly in need of expertise to help us intelligently negotiate the complex epistemic object systems that enable us to live our social lives (Knorr-Cetina, 1997). A related proposition is that these complex systems of objects are becoming increasingly familiar and ordinary and thus our everyday subject-object interactions are also becoming more complex. For example, a library client’s reading list maintained through the library’s catalogue as the borrower’s own file and consisting of works already read (referred perhaps through interactions with multiple reference librarians), works waiting to be read, and perhaps even commentaries on these works or notations of membership in a library book club where these books are discussed and referred to other readers is an example of the increasingly blurred boundary of expertise in the public library context. The point to be emphasized is that expertise is distributed and enacted through practice, rather than being contained in firm boundaries of ownership and accounting. Perhaps more than ever, library clients are engaged in their library-based knowledge practices, through much tighter connections with their library’s knowledge objects and reference staff. As we are engaged in sophisticated or complex epistemic practice, objects become integrated into our daily lives. Everyday citizens become their own experts as they mediate their social lives through various information and knowledge objects.

From the library’s perspective, again, the online catalogue, online databases and internet resources are examples of objects where increasing levels of knowledge and expertise are needed and arguably where there is greater need for teaching and learning at the reference desk. The particular library practice responsible for providing that mediated expertise is, in this case, the reference service, whether that is through face-to-face interaction, or through other technologically-enabled media.

7.1.4 The irreducible whole: a framework of reference service as epistemic practice

As the findings in Chapters Five and Six suggest, there is much more going on within this public library’s reference services than is ever formally reported in institutional accounts. In this case, ‘more’ is characterized as social, informational, relational interaction and is finally illustrative of an everyday or non-expert epistemic practice. Table 7-1: Core elements and features of reference service as epistemic practice summarizes this conceptual framework as it has been discussed in this chapter, by naming the individual elements and their key features that only when taken together enact this practice.
This discussion summarizes the previous sections and addresses the over-arching discussion question posed at the beginning of this chapter. The first column names the elements of this larger epistemic practice as: a) library organization as structure b) reference staff and clients as human agents and c) library resources as knowledge objects. The directional arrows indicate that all three entities, with these key features and taken together, enact the reference service as epistemic practice; the second column names the main features of these elements. The reference service as epistemic practice is situated between the library structure and the human agents and knowledge objects because practice mediates or co-constitutes this structure-agency-object relationship. Reference as epistemic practice is thus defined and characterized as follows:

*Reference service as epistemic practice is the ongoing interaction of the reference staff and client agents and the library’s knowledge objects with the library as structure where agents are oriented towards learning. This practice is regularly enacted and contested through various types of a) reference encounters; b) information relationships; and c) local library rules, routines, and branch library cultures.*

The library is the institutionalized structure both enabling and constraining the reference service as epistemic practice. This common ground or field on which reference
clients and staff engage in their practice is legislated, authorized and dominated by the library as institution. The library managers behave less as individual agents of the practice, and more as a single entity most visible as the practice’s prevailing structure. The library as institution allocates resources, maintains order, establishes policy, and engages indirectly via these policies and procedures in the epistemic activities of the reference practice. The library institution also reproduces its own routines and habits, such as the validation of membership by regular presentation of clients’ library cards, through the activities of the reference staff and clients. Librarians and clients who practice reference are both constrained and enabled by the library as structure.

Many clients ask information questions and have some ideas about the types of answers they expect to receive from these reference librarians; however, equally the case, other clients may have no idea what to expect either from the reference service specifically or from their library service more broadly. Exploring these differences in clients’ knowledge and experience of the “public library” as an “idea” could shape how reference service in particular is presented within public libraries in the future. Some practices depend on the existence of a shared knowledge among all agents and in this way they often have a “membership” dimension to their structures. However, in the case of public libraries, a client’s membership is not immediately relevant at the reference desk, making it a more “unbounded” social-organizational structure. A public library’s practice “structures” (e.g., the organization, programs or service “desks”) are influenced in larger ways by politics, distributions of power, and its public representations as part of the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1989). And while each library is unique in these ways, most public libraries in North America are also at least superficially similar in presenting these structures. Defining how a library or its reference practice is structurally different from a bookstore or another information organization or service is superficially obvious (the library organization as the structure or the Chapter/Indigo corporation as the structure) but is also more complex, requiring a deeper understanding of these invisible “human” or agentic dimensions of epistemic practice.

Neither the library institution as structure, nor the librarian-client agents exist independently of each other; they essentially co-constitute each other in the street-level epistemic practice of reference. And it is precisely for this reason that we need to recognize reference service formally and theoretically using a practice approach, because doing so recognizes the richness and complexity of the service as this ethnography reveals it. This
approach then provides vocabulary, concepts and theory for understanding and perhaps applying it to other types of organizational studies.

The reference practice is also contested and open to change through learning both by the agents within the practice, and by the larger structure. In unpredictable ways and through their regular and repeated interactions with their clients, staff members individually and collectively debate, restrict, broaden or otherwise create change in the policies and procedures that guide their routines and epistemic activities. Staff are information experts insofar as they are domain specialists in two areas: the organization, classification, presentation, evaluation and interpretation of a vast range of information resources within the broadest historical mission of the public library and the current information seeking and use behaviours of their particular clients. Reference clients also participate in this practice as epistemic agents but their specialist domains vary widely and are also contested and renegotiated. Staff and clients co-constitute routines and habits of the reference practice although many of these structural elements of their practice originally derive from the library as institution.

Reference interactions occur at the institutional boundary where library clients address reference librarians with their social and informational queries. In practice terms, these interactions represent human agency. A typology of four types of interactions – transactional, systematic, interactional and social – classifies these encounters along various dimensions related to information exchange, interpersonal communication and mode of practice. This typology captures the scope and range of agency encounters observed during the course of this study and each of the encounters reflects a human to human practice where these knowledge processes are implied through words and actions or are directly enacted: sensemaking, knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing. Each interaction is a discrete activity within the larger reference practice. Most importantly, what we learned from an analysis of these interactions is that there are many other aspects to this larger practice, notably implications of information relationships and clients’ needs and uses of the library staff for social connection. The library clients as agents approach the reference service as individuals whose power in this practice is manifest in their constant ability to choose their interaction and participation. The reference staff are more constrained by the structure of the library institution but are also autonomous agents in the sense that they choose to enter into and then stay in their positions. Certainly, however, the financial

29 How effectively this expertise is enacted in day-to-day one-to-one interaction is the subject of much LIS research particularly in the areas of information seeking and use studies (Fisher et al, 2005) but has not been a primary focus of this study.
incentive to work for the library both enables and constrains their participation in this practice.

Reference service is characterized as an epistemic practice where the information relationships are constructed and sustained through interpersonal fields of connection, information empathy, repeated encounters over time, the enactment of each branch library’s particular reference culture, and staff and client interactions with knowledge objects such as computers and materials in the library’s collections. Agents engaged in the practice of reference are also engaged in ongoing learning, if we understand that with each successive interaction, more learning occurs. This aspect of the epistemic practice can be observed and interpreted in the open-ended relationships librarians and clients sustain. Potential for continuous building of shared knowledge is present. The reference service looks and acts like an epistemic practice: relationships between and among staff and clients are evident, and are open-ended in that they are always being renegotiated.

7.2 Reflections on the library as organization in the knowledge society

If we accept that the reference service is most meaningfully understood as an epistemic practice, then we can also begin to understand how the library as institutional structure enabling this practice, functions, or has the potential to function, also as a knowing organization (Choo, 2006). The structures which enable and constrain practices – in this case library organizations - in our knowledge society also need to be aware of and adapt more deliberately epistemic habits which are more likely to be “constructive” and “creative” and less likely to be “performative” or “normative” (Knorr-Cetina, 1997, p.xx). In this sense, constructive and creative suggest elements of change, that practices are evolving, and responsive to the agents in their ongoing interactions. Rather than relying on their structures for creative direction, epistemic practices are oriented or tilted towards change and evolution using knowledge and learning as goals or guides. Epistemic practices occur in their performance or enactment – they evolve in action, rather than in reliance on the norms of structure. This shift is not an either-or proposition but is more of a purposive shift in degree and orientation. Structures most likely to become institutionalized are those with the greatest time-space extension (Giddens, 1984, p. 17); in the case of the public library which has existed in North America for more than one hundred years with more or less the same structure, this tendency may account in part for their difficulty to change or adapt existing habits and routines. Theoretically such structures should look more closely to the epistemic practices in which they participate and to the ways they enable and constrain these
practices for clues to their reproduction in a knowledge society defined less by experts interacting with their information systems and instead defined more in relational terms as described here:

A knowledge society is not simply a society of more experts, of technological infra- and information structures, and of specialists rather than participant interpretations. It means that knowledge cultures have spilled and woven their tissue into society, the whole set of processes, experiences and relationships that wait on knowledge and unfold with its articulation. This “dehiscence” of knowledge, the discharge of knowledge relations into society is what needs to be rendered as a problem to be solved in a sociological (rather than economic) account of knowledge societies (Knorr-Cetina, 1997, p.8)

The triage model of reference service can be interpreted as a model where expertise and knowledge processes are segregated from their social relations of practice. By structuring the delivery of the service based on an individual staff member’s ability to interpret a client’s verbalized needs and to channel that client and their question according to “level of difficulty” of the question creates potential for large gaps or missed understandings in these interaction. Moreover the results of this study illustrate that URPLO’s reference clients as library agents also want to engage with their library in relational ways, in addition to the transactional or routinized ways. Whether this preference continues over time and space will require that both the reference staff and managers jointly monitor the service from a practice perspective. The habit of seeing from a more routinized perspective is the danger of privileging the known habits, rules and routines of structure over human agency. Managing more explicitly from a practice perspective would mean that both library as structure and the clients and staff agents together evolve and develop the service by understanding activities and their adaptations across time and space. This is not to say there is no place for routine or transactional kinds of interactions; rather it is to say that creative and constructive relational dimensions should figure more largely as these practices reproduce themselves over time.

Because of the way this library organization structures its reference service more or less geographically and departmentally according to the service delivery framework arranged by types and sizes of branches, there appear to be limited opportunities for ongoing cross-branch knowledge creation and sharing that is more informal than formal. The reference service is an epistemic practice at the immediately local level, but the ongoing learning appears to stay in the local branches and become re-interpreted as local culture when in fact, there may be ways that reference services in these branches are being progressively adapted to address changing client behaviours and expectations. The opportunity to scale up changes to the level of the library as organization from the street-
level branch staff members may be available but was not observed during the limited period of this study.

These findings also suggest that the reference staff, for their part, behave as their own epistemic practice of experts insofar as they are generally oriented towards learning and co-constructing their reference service with their client-agents as a shared collective. Again from the library organization’s perspective, their approach to staff training is more fixed and formal, unitized again into hours of training, numbers of questions and formal workshop sessions. What the librarian agents say and do suggests that they prefer to hone their skills, and expand their knowledge in the process of doing or practice, and that they learn more from their colleagues through observation and participation in the practice, than they do from formal or occasional instruction. How the reference staff approach problems in their practice suggests that they are in fact oriented already towards creative and constructive learning if the rules and routines fail to provide relevant or practical direction.

In the voices of the library managers who are also themselves each individual librarian agents, and who have all been members of other library reference service practices in their pasts, as they reflect on the current URPLO reference service we can hear the structure-agency tension with which they grapple. In their practice, however, they privilege the rules of the library structure instead. If the library as institution is to become a knowing organization in terms of having a “shared understanding of the organization’s context and aspirations” (Choo, 2006, p.2), it must find ways to more directly participate in its organizational practices where such understandings are co-constituted with both staff and client agents, across the fields of library practice such as the reference service. It is not enough, clearly, to only hear individual voices of agents outside this field of practice, because it is really only in the enactment of the shared information and knowledge processes that it will learn in ways that enable organizational evolution over time. In sum, to understand what types of knowledge are present and what knowing processes are at work in the reference service, we should regard it from the perspective of an epistemic practice – constructive, creative, relational, and oriented towards ongoing learning.

7.3 Study contribution
This study set out to discover if and how knowledge, knowledge processes and learning were present and if so, how they were “at work” in the public library organization to address the larger question many of these organizations were posing during the 1990’s and into the 21st century. Like many publicly supported services, libraries have been and continue to be
required to demonstrate their relevance in their larger social context; the question being asked is still broadly speaking this one: how should we adapt our organization and services to the technology-enabled knowledge society? As a core service for public libraries and as a service where information, knowledge and learning are embedded in its process and outcomes, the reference service was selected as the site for this study, where an in-depth ethnographic approach to these questions could be undertaken.

The significant ontological shift I took following from this research was to move my primary focus for understanding from the unit of the organization and management’s perspective to the unit of practice and the shared perspectives of the clients and street-level bureaucrats. I could not understand the library as knowing organization through the lens of the reference service as I had anticipated at the outset. Whereas it might be logically implied that the reference practice is a microcosm and therefore an exemplar of the library as organization, in fact this is not what my data suggested. An intervening theoretical lens, the lens of practice was needed before I could move my understandings back to the organizational level. These study implications may interest three groups of readers - public library managers, LIS researchers, reference practitioners.

The main contribution of this study is the articulation of a practice framework for understanding and studying the reference service within the public library as organization. Despite the rich and continuously nuanced theoretical landscape of information seeking and use in context theory (Fisher et al, 2005), such an explicit practice approach as taken here, using social theory as the foundation, has not been so specifically undertaken in previous LIS research. Related research on the role of libraries as public spaces (Bushman & Leckie, 2007; Mattern, 2007) only indirectly touches on the concepts of structure, agency and objects, but without a clear focus on the reference process, a core subject of LIS study. This study challenges previous interpretations of reference services as a transactional, unitized question-answer activity and depicts it in a larger context as an interactional, relational set of activities that altogether characterize an epistemic practice. This is not to posit that the transactional, market-oriented approach to reference services should be thrown out, but rather to suggest that there are other dimensions which are just as or if not more important to peoples’ lifelong learning, that perhaps should be recognized to balance or expand on this market-based approach. By raising the researcher’s eye from the level of the reference transaction or the one-to-one information query and retrieval, to the level of relationship and practice across time and space, we have a more complete picture of the service as a whole, and we can also see a little more clearly how the public library’s reference interactions are
also situated in socio-cultural contexts. Most important for appreciating this practice framework is the recognition that these three dimensions of structure, agency and objects are interdependent – they cannot be separated or neglected for the most robust understanding of the reference service. Although some reference research is informed by its particular setting be it in an academic, corporate, public library or other organizational context, much research also detaches the reference process and results from its practice and its structural-organizational contexts, and in doing so, this discussion argues, indirectly hides, assumes or ignores these effects on this individual reference interaction. Finally, this approach might also be useful in understanding other how other public library services function.

This study makes a contribution to the field of organizational behaviour and knowledge management insofar as it depicts a specific, commonly occurring knowledge and information activity from a organizational boundary practice perspective. The reference process is also a sensemaking and knowledge sharing process. Through the notion of practice, I attempt to make sense of these activities as they make use of shared, tacit or experiential, and explicit dimensions of knowledge. To the degree that it succeeds, may be suggested by future reference research that acknowledges or makes use of these concepts. The notion of expertise – who is an expert and what is their domain of expertise - is called into question by these findings. The traditional notion of reference work is that the librarian is the expert who assists and instructs her client; in some of the interactions discussed here, the reference clients are clearly experts in their own domains and this shared expertise reproduced over time can yield more visible and accountable knowledge and knowing. The explicit learning orientation of reference work as an epistemic practice foregrounds what library staff do not yet know. In this study the emphasis shifts but only partially: library staff remain expert in understanding the structure, access and use of information – but this expertise is only completed through the collaborative learning process of interaction with clients and knowledge objects.

Many aspects of the social and informational activities that take place in a public library’s face-to-face reference service are challenged and named in this study. The typology of reference encounters may be useful to managers and practitioners who want a view beyond the narrowest transactional interpretation of their services. While Radford’s study of academic library reference service (1999) distinguishes the relational aspects of reference work, its emphasis is more heavily on interpersonal communication than on the informational aspects of these relationships. The notion of information relationships, while highly
provisional and very difficult to make explicit, offers future researchers some potential avenues to pursue and to challenge. What mechanisms trigger beginning and ending these relationships? What populations do and do not seek and participate in these relationships? For example, where else in public libraries are these relationships present and how do they overlap? What would a similar study of children’s reference service points yield? Within the area of virtual reference services, how might any of these findings also be present or differently formed or not present at all?

Nardi & O’Day (1998) note the formidable challenge of studying and making explicit the activities in reference work. The challenge they articulate is that so much of this work is invisible in the ordinary day-to-day renderings libraries have available for themselves. This study attempts to address that inherent quality in a minor way, and to uncover some of the nuances of reference work from the perspective of sensemaking, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. In taking this practice perspective to managing its core services, the public library could strengthen its capacity for change as a learning organization within the larger context of a knowledge society.

7.4 Becoming a reflexive researcher

As I reflected on the data during the “dwelling in” (Burawoy, 1998, p.5) process of reflexive research, where the researcher engages in a “dialogue … of theory with itself” (p.5), I began to see and then to understand what my data were uncovering. It became apparent early in the data collection process that there were “multiple realities” available for seeing at these three reference desks. Later, in the parallel processes of analyzing data and committing myself to interpretation through writing, I could see that library managers, the reference staff and their clients all bring their own human perspectives, language, knowledge and experiences to their interaction with and understanding of reference service. Not only is there evidence of multiple realities, but similarly, there is also some evidence of (Hammersley, 1992; Law, 2006) at least from the perspectives of the research participants. For example, interactions are also transactions; information relationships are also repeated transactions.

In taking a qualitative approach to this research problem and associated questions, this study cannot be assessed for its reliability or validity, but instead should be reflected upon in so far as it achieves researcher trustworthiness. As a participant observer and former practitioner with strong connections to this world of the reference service and this library organization in particular, my methods, data analysis and findings should be
scrutinized with perhaps even greater attention than in other similar studies. Researcher trustworthiness is established on the basis of these criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In terms of credibility, they call on the researcher to adequately represent the construction of the social world both in terms of the process used and in terms of the representations of the community of study. A prolonged stay in the field, persistent observation, triangulation of data, the search for negative cases, discussions or debriefing with peers and checks with members of the community under study – these are all means for strengthening the researcher’s credibility. I fulfilled these requirements in a number of different ways including an extended stay in the field until I felt I was not seeing any new instances or activities. I organized one externally facilitated debriefing session with study participants and I organized another session to present preliminary analysis with staff from another public library altogether. In both cases, minor adjustments were made to the terms chosen, but confirmation for the direction I was taken was provided.

Very early in my observations of the staff and clients at the reference desk in the pilot branch library, two pivotal understandings occurred marking a definitive personal clarification for me about my role as researcher: I saw and felt myself behaving not as a reference librarian alongside my colleagues, but as an outsider and an observer with a different lens altogether and the second clear understanding I gained was that what I had always “thought I would see so easily” was not as readily visible as I had anticipated. And so the surprises and changes in direction being taken in the study began in the earliest stages. On the surface, initially, the reference work I observed did not look like much more of an activity than longer or more often briefer “retail counter” types of activities. Gradually upon further observation and after a prolonged period of reflection, interpretation and data analysis did the present interpretation become grounded.

The well-established limitations of an ethnographic approach and the case study method also bear on this study (Hammersley, 1992). Although every effort was made to select libraries and reference services with the fewest explicit aspects of uniqueness or differentiation to allow readers to make transitions to their own situations and experiences, the simple fact of studying three social-informational settings that more or less follow the same set of practice rules disrupts that objective. Social settings are all different and their practices vary tremendously even within the same structures. These study findings cannot be transferred to other settings. Instead, readers, practitioners and researchers must
conduct their own assessments and manifest any transpositions of these findings and this context for themselves.

One of the principle limitations of this study was the insufficient attention and voice given to the reference service clients. Despite various attempts to adapt my approaches to seeking interviews with these clients, many would not participate and of those clients whom I did interview, the ‘halo’ effect of the public library seemed to limit any critical perspectives. We must continue to explore and experiment with ways of talking with and studying our users and their beliefs about and understandings of the library-as-concept without suggesting direct or indirect perceptions of self-interest.

This study has clearly taken a constructivist approach within the larger “interpretive” paradigm of social research (Williamson, 2006). In the tradition of other social constructionist LIS researchers such as Chatman, this study exposes and uncovers, rather than invents or discovers anew. One of the main advantages of this constructivist approach is that “ways of thinking about issues, which may not have occurred to the researcher, are often revealed. Thus, the complexities of the real world have some chance of emerging” (Williamson, 2006, p. 98); if this study succeeds even in the smallest gesture, it will be because the real-world of these particular reference and branch library communities are better understood as being nuanced and complex and are depicted in their relevant context on a perhaps larger and more accessible theoretical canvas.

7.5 Study implications

This study suggests that the theoretical and interpretive lens of practice may be helpful in articulating other types of research problems that may be present or being confronted by public libraries. There is much more to know and understand about the role of knowledge objects and how those roles may be changing within the context of public library reference services. Are we all becoming our own everyday experts engaged in epistemic or other types of practice? Can we conclude now that all knowledge is really only knowledge that is shared and what does that idea mean for public libraries?

If public library managers see their reference and other types of library services more clearly through this lens of “epistemic practice”, they might have a more directly explicit sense of the subtleties of their front-line staff’s interactions and day-to-day practices. While reference questions are declining, perhaps what might matter regardless of this quantitative fact is that in addition to these interactions, reference service also incrementally builds information relationships that can potentially be sustained for entire lifetimes. The whole
notion of measuring and reporting on reference work by counting “subject and information queries” is called into question; perhaps there are other measures that could be enunciated and added to these narrow question-answer transactions. How practice-based learning and training is developed and used by reference staff is also highlighted here. There is some evidence in this study for the idea that libraries and particularly managing librarians are organizationally and professionally oriented to value and privilege “structure” and the most rational or technological methods of organization of information, knowledge and services over individual interpersonal behaviours, beliefs and interactions. This study invites managers, practitioners and researchers to examine that assertion, and perhaps to look for ways to recognize the more fluid, changing, and creative practice of reference work in its lived moments. If public library organizations have not made as much progress to change and adapt to the knowledge society, perhaps it is because we have a stronger gravitational pull towards a constraining or change-resistant “structure” or “tradition”; perhaps we need to learn to integrate elements of sociality and practice more readily into our larger organizational values, beliefs and processes. The relationships among the public library as organization whose core values are associated with democracy, intellectual freedom and the public sphere, the human dimension of stewardship and service and the library’s collection of knowledge objects are linked; this interdependence should be explored using other research methods in future research.

Future research using this framework in other types of organizational settings (e.g., public health) could negate or confirm the idea of information relationships and their dimensions. We could also refine our knowledge of how social theory intersects with or complements LIS theories by studies of specific types of library users. From an organizational perspective, what elements of structure are specifically enabling or constraining what kinds of knowledge practices within the library’s widest organizational landscape? And finally, building on this work, how can we in the LIS domain, add to the ideas behind social epistemology in an increasingly sophisticated and complex world where information and communication technologies become such powerful extensions of our physical, emotional and cognitive selves?

7.6 Conclusion

Questioning the public library’s relevance in the knowledge society by looking at its face-to-face reference service from the perspective of the knowing organization was the starting point for this study. Taking URPLO as the library organization of study, we can surmise that
the public library can and will continue to be relevant in this environment by knowing itself better – knowing the nuances of its practices and recognizing how its organizational structures enable and constrain practice. From this ethnography, we learn that one way such organizational knowing can come is through deconstructing, exposing, naming and understanding material, human and structural interdependencies within the highly invisible human work that occurs at these community-institution boundaries. This study introduces practice as the mediating structure linking the organization with its individual members of the reference service. Reference practice consists of finding and making meaning through information interactions, information relationships, organizational structure, library collections, staff and citizen agents. The practice is specifically an epistemic practice because it entails processes that are central to our individual need for making sense of and coming to know and understand our world informationally. Public library reference work within this framework of epistemic practice is a unique form of meaning-making for citizen clients of the URPLO community.

When made visible simply via the “Ask a librarian” logo in the “global brand” of the public library, reference service in its most human form might indeed be at risk of extinction – upon closer scrutiny, however, it remains elusive and entirely uncommon.
References


[http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/definitionsreference.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/definitionsreference.cfm)


Appendix 1: Library values for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century  
(adapted from Gorman, 2000, pp. 26-27)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library as Place</th>
<th>Characteristics of and processes for creating values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values defined</strong></td>
<td><strong>Stewardship</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                  | - Preserving the human record to ensure that future generations know what we know  
|                  | - Caring and nurturing education for librarianship so that we can pass our best professional values and practices  
|                  | - Being good stewards of our libraries so that we can earn the respect of our communities |
|                  | **Service** |
|                  | - Ensuring that all policies and procedures are animated by the ethic of service to individuals, communities, society and posterity.  
|                  | - Evaluating all of our policies and procedures using service as a criterion |
|                  | **Intellectual Freedom** |
|                  | - Maintaining a commitment to the idea that all people in a free society should be able to read and see whatever they wish to read and see  
|                  | - Defending the intellectual freedom of all members of our communities  
|                  | - Defending free expression of minority opinions  
|                  | - Making the library’s facilities and programs accessible to all |
|                  | **Rationalism** |
|                  | - Organizing and managing library services in a rational manner  
|                  | - Applying rationalism and scientific method to all library procedures and programs |
|                  | **Literacy and Learning** |
|                  | - Encouraging literacy and the love of learning  
|                  | - Encouraging lifelong sustained reading  
|                  | - Making the library a focus of literacy teach |
|                  | **Equity of Access to Recorded Knowledge and Information** |
|                  | - Ensuring that all library resources and programs are accessible to all  
|                  | - Overcoming technological and monetary barriers to access |
|                  | **Privacy** |
|                  | - Ensuring the confidentiality of records of library use  
|                  | - Overcoming technological invasions of library use |
Appendix 2: Ethics Protocol Approval

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
Office of the Vice-President, Research and Associate Provost
Ethics Review Office

PROTOCOL REFERENCE #17094

April 27, 2006

Prof. C.W. Choo
Faculty of Information Studies
140 St. George St.
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Ms. Mary Cavanagh
Faculty of Information Studies
140 St. George St.
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Prof. L. Howarth
Faculty of Information Studies
140 St. George St.
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Dear Prof. Choo, Prof. Howarth and Ms. Cavanagh:

Re: Your research protocol entitled “Exploring the Role of the Public Library in a Knowledge Society: A Qualitative Study of the Human Centred Knowledge Process around the Reference Desk as a Public Space”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: April 27, 2006
Expiry Date: April 26, 2007

We are writing to advise you that a member of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research study, for a period of one year, under the REB’s expedited review process. Ongoing projects must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

The following consent documents have been approved for use in this study: Notice of Study Poster (received March 28, 2006) Consent Form for Interviews, and Research Study Information Sheet (received April 18, 2006). Participants should receive a copy of their consent form.

During the course of the research, any significant deviations from the approved protocol (that is, any deviation which would lead to an increase in risk or a decrease in benefit to participants) and/or any unanticipated developments within the research should be brought to the attention of the Ethics Review Office.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Peto
Ethics Review Coordinator

Simcoe Hall, 27 King’s College Circle, Room 10A, Toronto Ontario M5S 1A1
TEL: 416/946-3273 FAX: 416/946-5783 EMAIL: ethics.review@utoronto.ca
Appendix 3: Study Information Sheet (French version)

Fiche de renseignements sur une étude de recherche

Qui je suis

Je m’appelle Mary Cavanagh et je suis étudiante au doctorat à la faculté des Études en information de l’Université de Toronto. Pour communiquer avec moi, vous pouvez m’écrire à l’adresse cavanagh@fis.utoronto.ca ou me téléphoner au (613) 266-1414.

De quoi traite cette étude?

Pour répondre à l’une des exigences de mon diplôme, j’effectue une étude de recherche à la URPLO, sous la supervision de ma faculté de rattachement à l’Université de Toronto. 

Je m’intéresse aux conversations échangées entre les usagers adultes et le personnel des services des renseignements de la bibliothèque. Voici une brève description de l’objet de mon étude :

Cette recherche a pour but de comprendre la nature des échanges fondés sur le partage des connaissances et sur l’apprentissage, survenant entre les employés de la bibliothèque et entre ceux-ci et leurs clients sur place, en situation réelle à la frontière institutionnelle du service de référence des succursales urbaines de la bibliothèque.

Cette étude ne fait l’objet d’aucune aide financière.

Comment cette étude est-elle menée?

- J’observerai les interactions entre les usagers adultes de la bibliothèque et le personnel aux services de référence ou des renseignements de trois succursales de la bibliothèque. Je serai assise au comptoir de renseignements et je porterai un insigne d’identité.

- Je prendrai des notes sur ce que je verrai et entendrai.

- Je demanderai aux personnes que j’observerai si elles souhaitent que je les interroge en privé, pendant 30 à 60 minutes, sur leurs échanges avec le personnel des services de référence ou des renseignements.

De quelle manière la vie privée des usagers de la bibliothèque sera-t-elle préservée?

Cette étude a été approuvée par le Comité d’éthique de l’Université de Toronto. Une grande attention a donc été portée sur sa conception, de manière à ce que les personnes y participant soient protégées, et sur sa conformité aux exigences éthiques stipulées dans l’énoncé de politique élaboré par les principaux organismes de recherche du gouvernement du Canada, intitulé Énoncé de politique des trois Conseils : Éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains.
La direction de la URPLO m’a autorisé à mener cette étude dans ses succursales.

Cette étude sera conforme aux exigences de la Loi sur l’accès à l’information municipale et la protection de la vie privée de la province de l’Ontario et aux directives de protection de la vie privée de la URPLO.

Les noms des participants à l’étude resteront strictement confidentiels. Les notes et les dossiers d’entretien seront détruits par la chercheuse dans cinq ans. Seule la chercheuse et les membres de son comité de supervision y auront accès. Aucun renseignement personnel identifiable ne sera recueilli ou transmis d’aucune manière.

**Que faire si je ne souhaite pas participer?**

- Votre participation doit être entièrement volontaire.

- La chercheuse quittera temporairement le service de référence si elle estime que quelqu’un est mal à l’aise en sa présence ET/OU si quelqu’un lui demande de quitter les lieux pendant un échange avec un employé des services de référence.

- Vous pouvez poser des questions en tout temps.

- Si vous souhaitez participer ou cesser de participer en tout temps, il vous suffit d’avisé la chercheuse sans donner de motif.

**Quel est le calendrier de l’étude?**


**Pour obtenir plus d’information, téléphonez-moi –**

Mary Cavanagh (613) 266-1414

OU

adressez-vous au personnel de votre succursale.
Appendix 4: Interview Consent Form

Mary Cavanagh, Doctoral candidate, Faculty of Information Studies University of Toronto

Contact information: cavanagh@fis.utoronto.ca / (613) 266-1414

Research statement

Purpose and objectives

The objective of this research is to understand nature of the knowledge sharing and learning based conversations that occur between and among library staff and their clients face-to-face, at the real-world institutional boundary of the reference service point in urban library branches. This study receives no financial support. It is being undertaken in fulfillment of the requirements of the doctoral degree program within the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto and is being supervised by a committee of faculty members from this department including: C.W. Choo, N. Caidi and L. Howarth.

To realize this study, the researcher / interviewer will conduct an interview that will last from 30 to 60 minutes with the respondent. The researcher will ask questions about how you may create and share tacit knowledge and how you might learn or acquire knowledge through these exchanges with the reference desk staff. The interview will be tape recorded. The researcher will conduct 10 interviews with staff and library clients at each branch library. All interviews will be conducted in English.

Confidentiality

The names of the respondents will be kept completely confidential; however, the name of the organization will not be kept confidential. With the exception of the chief executive officer, respondents cannot be identified in any publication. The interview notes and records will be destroyed by the researcher in five years. Only the researcher and her supervisory committee will have access to these notes and records.

Questions

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to ask questions at any time during the interview. You are particularly welcome to ask questions before signing this form. You are free to end the interview at any time and to choose not to answer any question without having to justify your decision. If you wish to withdraw, simply tell the researcher. You will be advised if there is any new information or if there are changes to procedures that might affect your decision to participate.

Benefits

Your participation will contribute to our greater understanding of knowledge sharing and learning opportunities in the personal, face-to-face interactions that occur between and among library clients and library staff at the reference desk.
Respondent’s statement (please check if you agree)

☐ The study described above has been explained to me.
☐ I agree to participate in the study.
☐ I can voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.
☐ I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
☐ I have received a copy of the consent form.
☐ I agree to have the interview tape recorded.
☐ I am 18 years old or older.
☒ I would like to receive a summary of the research results when they become available and here is how you can reach me with this summary:

E-mail address: ____________________________________________

Respondent: ___________________________  Date: ________________
Appendix 5: Revised Interview Guide – Library Clients & Library Staff

Themes to cover with respondent

Respondent # __________________________
Date of interview __________________________
Start time of interview __________________________
Finish time of interview __________________________
Branch Library __________________________

Introduction

- Present oneself. Thank the respondent for agreeing to the interview
- Review study purpose and goals
- Present the consent form and go over the information within the form
- Answer any questions the respondent might have
- Tell the respondent to feel free to ask any questions at any moment; that s/he can end her/his participation to the interview at any time s/he wishes; to inform her or him that s/he may choose not to answer a question
- Reassure the respondent that there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. The researcher is interested in his/her experience; s/he is the expert
- Invite the respondent to sign the consent form (two copies) and leave to her/him a copy

Researcher’s introduction following formal consent being provided:

Clients: I am interested in following up with you on the conversation you had with the librarian/library staff member at the reference desk today. You have agreed to participate in this study and to talk in a little bit of detail about your experiences with the public library and with this library in particular. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. At any point in our conversation, you may end your participation or decline to answer a question. Please be assured, there is no right or wrong answer. I am interested in hearing, in your words, about your experiences with the staff at the reference desk, and about how you use the library and how you feel about the library more generally. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers here and that anything you say will be reported anonymously. I hope this will feel more like a ‘chat’ than an interview – and so wherever you take the conversation will be just fine! Let’s begin.

- Can you begin by telling me about your first experiences in public libraries? How did you come to use libraries?
- How did you come to use this particular library?
- What do you use the library for?
- Would it matter to you if this library decided to promote more use of self-service and information technologies?
• Can you tell me any experiences you've had where you learned something from using the public library?
• More specifically about the reference desk – tell me about when you might have used the reference service in the past.
• Do you know any of the people who work here? Tell me about how you have come to know them if you can.
• Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Thank you for your participation.

Staff: I am interested in following up with you on some of the conversations I’ve observed you having with various clients at the reference desk over the past few weeks. Specifically, I would like to explore how you felt about these conversations, whether you feel you learned something or shared some knowledge through the course of the conversation and why you chose to participate in the way that you did. I also have some more general questions about how you feel about your work and the experience you have to do the job. I have a # of questions that are really meant to guide our conversation. If you would like to stop at any point, or decline to answer a question, please feel free to do so. And finally, we will go where you go in the conversation. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers at all. I'll also invite you to add anything you would like to say at the end of the interview.
On library letterhead English/French

ATTENTION

[This branch library] is participating in an observational research study at the information desk to understand more about learning and knowledge sharing in adult patron / staff conversations.

Mary Cavanagh, University of Toronto doctoral student is observing interactions at the reference desk cavanagh@fis.utoronto.ca

From [x] date to [y] date
At various open hours throughout the week

For more information, pick up a blue information sheet or contact the library staff.
Appendix 7: Guide to Data Coding

Ontario provincial survey instructions
Source - 2006 ANNUAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES - DEFINITIONS AND INSTRUCTIONS

G1.4 Reference (typical week data)

Definition - G1.41 Number of standard reference transactions (criteria): A standard reference transaction is a request for information made directly by a library user that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff. (examples of reference questions include: ‘How can I find out when Andrew Wyeth was born?’ or ‘Can you help me to locate information on the Internet about skiing in Ontario?’) Standard reference transactions include reference requests library users make in person, on the phone, by regular mail (i.e., not e-mail) or by FAX. Information sources include print and non-print materials, electronic databases, catalogues and referrals to sources outside the library. If a request is referred to another branch, only the branch where the original request was made should count the reference request. If a library user has multiple questions, record each question as a separate transaction if it deals with a new subject.

The reference transaction is defined as “A standard reference transaction is a request for information made directly by a library user that involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources or bibliographic tools by library staff.” (Ontario Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Libraries Branch, 2006).

1. **Level One** normative coding categories as defined by the provincial authority.

Include:
- requests for help finding information on an electronic database or in the catalogue (other than simple checks of the library catalogue for a specific title),
- questions of fact or finding facts,
- literature searches,
- reader’s advisory questions,
- requests for information and referral,
- database searches, and
- requests received in person, by telephone, mail, or fax.

Exclude:
- requests for directions, information on locations, (e.g., ‘Is the library open Thursday nights?’)
- interlibrary loan requests,
- questions about rules or policies, (e.g., ‘What is the loan period for videotapes?’)
- requests for assistance about the use of the library and its services (i.e., library policy, procedures, services, programs, equipment, and facilities),
- shelf checks and simple checks of the library catalogue for specific items, and
- advertisements, bills, personal telephone calls, public notices or solicitations received by library staff.
2. **Level Two** descriptive coding categories (6) defined and annotated as defined by the researcher.

1. \(i = \text{item}\) - This category refers to patrons looking for a particular item, wanting to place a hold or pick up their book or any other format. Specific search for specific titles. The main point of the patron interacting with the staff member is to ‘locate’ or ‘get’ an item – and the patron knows all or part of the specifics of the item (e.g., author or title).

2. \(tech = \text{computer}\) - This category refers to patrons who are trying to work the technology but need to ask a question about it. This category is distinct from ‘p’ – which covers all queries related to procedures for using or accessing technology (e.g., how much does it cost to print?) This category often answers the ‘why does the computer do this …?’ or ‘I’m having a problem with the computer’.

3. \(w = \text{wayfinding}\) - This category refers to directional kinds of queries e.g., where are the printers? Different from ‘p’ questions – these ones are strictly ‘where’ questions?

4. \(ch = \text{chat}\) - This category refers to interactions where ‘chat’ was the only event i.e., there was no ‘library business’ conducted or discussed.

5. \(s/l = \text{subject/information}\) - This category refers to queries where patrons initiated queries for ‘subjects’ – e.g., do you have anything on spiders? This category refers to queries where patrons asked questions that had specific fact-based or informational answers e.g., why is it called Colonel By Day?

6. \(p = \text{policy and/or procedure}\) - This category refers to queries where patrons needed to know about the ‘library system’ and how it worked – e.g., “how do I request a book?” or “how do I access the internet?” These questions often start with ‘how’ – and refer to all the aspects of getting service from the library. Whereas ‘how do I book a computer’ is a ‘p’ question, ‘how do I make the computer work’ is a ‘tech’ question.

3. **Level Three** formative coding as defined by the researcher.

a) **Type of interaction**
   - interaction or transaction – bi or uni-directional
   - conduit-style communication vs. mutual / reciprocal or shared

b) **Knowledge and knowing present**
   - cultural, tacit-personal, explicit-codified
   - values – privacy, intellectual freedom, democracy, knowledge and learning
   - personal experience, technology,
   - policy, procedure,
   - local, organizational

c) **Process**
   - teaching, instructing
   - sharing, storytelling,
   - informing, doing,
   - learning,

d) **Interpersonal connection**
   - mutuality, reciprocal,
   - chat, social talk
   - disclosure, trust
   - humour, other emotion
Appendix 8: Level Two coding of interactions – MB sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDIUM BRANCH OBSERVATIONS (n=149)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 p I got this museum pass now and I don't know what to do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 c Is this computer out of order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 nb I want to reserve a DVD and it's out of date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 b I'm trying to find a few books</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 p I'm having difficulty with this interface and the search</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 b Do you have the little book that gives car prices?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 nb I'm looking for Sr. Wendy's panes of glass (4 requests)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 s/i Is/i there a yoga video for children?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 b I got a phone call and there's/i a book for me - do you have any idea what book it is/i?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 b There's/i a guy who walks/i around town and his/i name is/i Daniel Poliquin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 s Do you know what a pure laine is? Now we're going to look for books on grandparenting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 b I'm looking for books by xxx and apparently they're here</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 i Do you know if you have the voter's list yet?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 c I've heard that you have computer terminals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 p When I was online last night, there was this sound recording that I tried to put on hold but it wouldn't work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 ch Waves at Helene</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 w Where do you keep your Shakespeare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 b Can you put holds on these please?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 p How can I go about putting a hold on a DVD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 nb Termium - do you have this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 b I'd like to find a bok by xxx - it's called xxx</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 p I've booked a computer for 2 hours but it's not showing up that way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 p I'm having a problem with my library card - I'm trying to book a computer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 s I'm looking for some easy books in French for my son</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 p Do you have any way to access the archives for the citizen online? Do I have to pay?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 b I'm trying to find a book and I can't find it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 i I was told that XXX had the voter's list</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 i Do you have any application to amend?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 b Could you bring a book in for me?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 p Can I photocopy pictures of books here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 b I can't find this book can you help me?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 b Do you have the book life of pi?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 s Do you have a book on herbal teas?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 p I have a volunteer application, where can I drop it off?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 9: Intercoder Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference encounter</th>
<th>P= patron</th>
<th>L= Library staff</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P – AM – Hi I was in here before and you helped me – I was looking for career information and you gave me the name of a ‘blue book’? Do you think you could give it to me again? L – Oh, sure, if I recall correctly it was this guide to community organizations. Here’s the information – I’m printing it out for you. P – Yes, that’s great – now can you tell me again why I wanted this? L – Well, I use it a lot for referrals to organizations.</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P – AM – Hi if I order a book, how long will it take to get here? L – 5 days L2 – No, a week, really. P- Oh well, that won’t work because I need it for an exam that’s due in 5 days. L – Well, if you find another copy at a branch you can get to, then I can call ahead and make sure it’s there. [Patron goes away and then returns with the title written down on the paper]. Well, I can put the book on hold, because they’re not answering the phone – and here’s a bus map so you’ll know where to go and hopefully it will be on the shelf.</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P – AM – I’ve got three books on hold and I looked on the shelf but I can only find 2 of them. Where else should I look? L – Well, let me look at your record and maybe I can tell more information. There’s xxx and xxxx and xxxx – I could look in the basement for your book or you could come back late rin the week depending on how much time you have. P – Well, I can wait if it’s not a big deal. Librarian goes away and returns from basement with the book.</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>w</td>
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<tr>
<td>P – AM – Hi I’m waiting for a public internet computer. Do you line up here? I’m a neophyte – L – You will have to choose language, choose filter, and then you choose Internet Explorer. It comes up to the Library home page, and then you have to type in your address. P – Well, when I go to a newspaper site what will I get? L – What exactly are you looking for? P – I want an article from the NYT’s L – We have the NYT upstairs – if you go to the third floor, they might be able to help you find that article. P – Well, I want an article that’s only available online. L – I would still recommend that you go upstairs just in case they can help you. P – Will they look it up on their computers because all the other ones are booked? L – Well, they can help you look for that – through their resources.</td>
<td>i</td>
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<tr>
<td>P – AM – I’m sorry I’m in unfamiliar territory – I’ve looked up a teen graphic novel – do you know where those are? L – Yes, the teen section is upstairs – about over here – on the 2nd floor.</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>w</td>
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<tr>
<td>P – AF – I’m looking for this book, I believe you’ll have it. L – Is it ok if I write on this? Writes down the #, it will be on the 2nd floor, it’s checked in- up the escalator on the far left the numbers are on the end.</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Reference & Information Services Guidelines

Service Philosophy

- Reference service is free and available to everyone.
- Service is available in both official languages.
- All questions are treated as confidential interactions between staff and customers.
- All reference inquiries are handled in a non-judgmental and impartial manner.
- Information services are provided seamlessly throughout the network of URPLO service points.
- All reference questions are considered equal.
- Information service extends beyond the collections of the URPLO.

Service Parameters

- Whenever possible, service is provided within the customer’s timeframe.
- An informed referral is the next step when we can’t locate the answer.
- Reference service includes both providing customers with the information and assisting customers to locate information.
- Information is provided only from reliable published sources, whether print or electronic.
- Information is provided from the “best” source, regardless of format.
- A variety of methods for accessing and delivering reference service are available.

Service Guidelines

- Reference and information staff are focused on quality customer service, and are proactive in anticipating and meeting customer needs.
- Assume we can find it!
- Reference service utilizes the collective knowledge and expertise of the staff.
- Reference staff provide information only; requests for advice or interpretation are referred to authorities in the field.
Service Philosophy

a) Free & Universal Access

Reference service is free and available to everyone.

URPLO’s Reference and Information service is provided free of charge. Service is provided to anyone who seeks information assistance and is not restricted to registered borrowers.

b) Language of Service

Service is available in both official languages.

Reference and Information Service is provided in both official languages, with bilingual staff in designated locations. InfoService, URPLO’s centralized telephone information service, also has bilingual staff available at all times.

c) Confidentiality

All questions are treated as confidential interactions between staff and customers.

Some customers may be reticent to reveal details and answer questions during the reference interview. It may be helpful to reassure them that their question and the information provided will remain confidential. A customer’s personal information (e.g., name and telephone number) and the details about the nature of the reference inquiry may only be used in the actual provision of the reference service. Staff will often share information about the question itself while working cooperatively to locate information.

Information located in response to a reference question may be left with a customer’s family member or colleague, or left on voice mail or sent by e-mail, only with the permission of the customer.

When making referrals to outside agencies with respect to a reference inquiry, only the information inquiry itself is shared. The customer’s personal information remains confidential and should only be shared with the customer’s permission. Personal information recorded in the provision of reference service is disposed of in accordance with the requirements of the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA).
c) **Impartial and Non-Judgmental Service**

*All reference inquiries are handled in a non-judgmental and impartial manner.*

The principle of intellectual freedom is fundamental to the provision of information service. Just as personal bias and opinion are suspended in the development of collections, they do not enter into a reference transaction. All questions are considered valid and are treated with respect.

d) **Seamless Service**

*Information services are provided seamlessly throughout the network of URPLO service points.*

Information Services are provided in all URPLO locations, based on the roles and relationships of the Community Branches, the District Branches, and the Main Library.

Each individual service point is a point of entry for reference questions and a point of delivery for responses to reference questions. It is not up to the customer to discern where to best ask the question.

At each service point, staff are responsible for:

- Intake of reference questions
- Conducting the reference interview
- Answering questions on-site, when resources permit
- Following up with customers as required (e.g., to arrange pick-up of photocopies, provide additional information, etc.)

In addition, staff at each service point are responsible for:

- Providing knowledgeable referrals to other URPLO resources and services within the formalized framework of referrals *(in development)*
- Providing knowledgeable external referrals when appropriate
e) **Equality of Questions**

*All reference questions are considered equal.*

Regardless of subject or customer, all questions are considered equal. A spelling check is as important as a request for statistical information; contest and homework questions are as important as questions on business or health. A consistent quality of service is provided to every customer.

f) **Beyond Our Borders**

*Information service extends beyond the collections of the URPLO.*

Some questions involve the identification of a particular title that may meet the customer’s information needs. If the title is not part of URPLO’s collection, checking the Consortium catalogue and offering eligible users a Consortium card, is a standard part of our service. Offering the customer the alternative of having us try to obtain the title through Interlibrary Loan is also a basic component of service in this situation.

2. **Service Parameters**

a) **Timeframe**

*Whenever possible, service is provided within the customer’s timeframe.*

i) **Turnaround Time**

Answers to basic reference inquiries are generally provided while the customer waits. In the cases of complex questions that can’t be resolved during the initial contact, staff should offer to pursue the question further and provide the information at a later time. A progress report on the status of the inquiry should be provided to the customer within 24 hours.

In general, questions will be handled on a first-come, first-served basis. However, every attempt will be made to respond to questions within the customer’s timeframe as established during the reference interview. The timeframe for responding may be affected by such factors as the complexity of the question, the number of questions already waiting for completion, and the availability of staff time.
ii) Time Spent on a Question
There is no set amount of time that staff should spend on a reference inquiry. As a general rule, staff should consult the resources available to them as fully as possible, within the context of limitations such as how busy the service point is, how many other demands are being placed on staff, and the staffing complement at the time.

c) Informed Referrals

An informed referral is the next step when we can’t locate the answer.

When we are not able to fully respond to a question, it is a standard part of service to refer the customer to other branches, other area libraries, or to external agencies as appropriate. A familiarity with the type of information and expertise available elsewhere is fundamental to making informed referrals.

When referring a customer from one URPLO location to another, or to an outside agency that provides more specialized information to the public, it is essential to call ahead to confirm that the customer will find the assistance he/she needs.

d) Providing Instruction vs. Providing the Answer

Reference service includes both providing customers with the information and assisting customers to locate information.

Our service is focused on connecting customers with the information they need, whether this involves providing them with the answer or assisting them in the research process.

In determining the best approach, staff will take into account the individual customer’s circumstances including: time, inclination to be taught, comfort level with technology, literacy level, physical circumstances, the availability of resources, etc. This assessment is a standard component of the reference interview.

The approach to homework questions is the same as for other reference inquiries -- it will include both approaches, depending on the assessment of the individual student’s circumstances.

e) Verifiable Sources

Information is provided only from reliable published sources, whether print or electronic.
A foundation of reference service is that information provided to customers must come from a verifiable source. Even in cases where staff have personal knowledge of an area, the information must be verified. As part of every reference transaction, it is essential to be able to cite the source of the information being provided to customers.

Calculations, translations and editorial advice are not provided to customers unless the information can be verified in a source. If possible, staff provide formulas, dictionaries, style guides, and referrals to assist customers with these types of questions.

f) **Electronic vs. Print Information**

Information is provided from the “best” source, regardless of format.

Staff use both print and electronic information resources in an integrated way. Staff use their knowledge of resources to provide the most complete and accurate answer to a customer’s question, regardless of format.

g) **Service Delivery Options**

A variety of methods for accessing and delivering reference service are available.

Customers seeking information can contact the Library in a variety of ways: in person, by telephone, by e-mail or by letter or fax. The principles outlined in these Guidelines for Reference & Information Service are applicable regardless of the means of communication, however the following are some considerations that are unique to a particular method of contact:

**In-Person:** In many cases one staff member may be responsible for assisting both in-person visitors and for answering the telephone. In general, priority is given to helping customers who come to the library in person before responding to telephone inquiries.

**Telephone:** Where feasible, when a call comes in while you are helping a person in the branch, answer the phone and ask the caller if they’re willing to hold. If, in your estimation, the caller will have a long wait, offer to take their name and number and call them back. If it is simply not feasible to answer the phone, allow the call to go to the voicemail system. Ensure that voicemail is checked frequently and that all calls are returned before the end of day.

**E-mail:** Guidelines for responding to questions submitted to this [email address] are currently in development. This service is coordinated through the Reference Department, Main Library.
Mail/Fax: Customers may choose to submit their questions by mail or fax. Staff should respond to questions received by either method following the same general guidelines as for all other inquiries. Information can be faxed from one library location to another for a customer to collect. The customer pays the equivalent of photocopy charges for the number of pages faxed. If the customer wishes to have information faxed to their home or business, the Find & Fax fee schedule applies. Staff also have the flexibility to mail information results to customers if the circumstances are extenuating.

3. Service Guidelines

a) Approachable and Proactive Staff

Reference and information staff are focused on quality customer service, and are proactive in anticipating and meeting customer needs.

The physical layout of the library, the vast extent of both print and electronic resources, and the growing complexity of the world of information often present an intimidating situation for library customers. Staff providing information services need to be sensitive to this, and to the importance of an approachable and friendly image. “Heads up” service means being alert to customers who are waiting or who appear to need assistance.

As well as providing service from a fixed physical location, such as a service desk, it is important for staff to move beyond this anchor space to offer assistance (e.g., at the catalogue and computers, in the library stacks).

b) Assume We Can Help

Assume we can find it!

The Library has a tremendous breadth and depth of information resources and staff expertise. While some reference questions may be daunting at first, a good rule of thumb is to assume we can find the answer to any given question, no matter the size of the local collection, and to work from this premise (referring the question as appropriate).

c) Teamwork and Cooperation

Reference service utilizes the collective knowledge and expertise of the staff.

One of the first principles of reference work is that no matter how much experience you have and no matter how much you know, you can never know it all. A team
approach to complex reference inquiries allows the customer the benefit of a number of “good minds.” Consultation with colleagues also allows time to think about the query, develop alternate strategies, and draw on the knowledge, experience and enthusiasm of a broader group of staff – all with the aim of providing the most knowledgeable and efficient service possible. Good reference service is about collaboration and not competition.

d) Specific Types of Questions

Reference staff provide information only; requests for advice or interpretation are referred to authorities in the field.

It is important to be especially careful not to interpret or paraphrase medical or legal information. The recommended approach is to read the information verbatim to a telephone customer, or to hand the appropriate materials to the customer in the library. If pressed to provide interpretation or advice, staff should emphasize that they are in no way qualified to do so and offer to refer the customer to a more appropriate agency, e.g., a legal aid office.

When helping customers to find consumer information, staff must guard against offering their own opinions or recommendations even when they have personal knowledge of the subject.

Last revised: January 28, 2005
Appendix 11 – URPLO Reference Librarian Job Description

**JOB DESCRIPTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOB TITLE:</th>
<th>Librarian</th>
<th>UNION:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEPARTMENT:</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRANCH:</td>
<td>URPLO Public Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIVISION:</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>LOCATION:</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUPervisor's JOB TITLE:</td>
<td>Manager, Coordinator or Supervising Librarian</td>
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**JOB SUMMARY (Overall Responsibilities)**

Provides professional library service in one or more of the following areas: information, quick and in-depth reference and readers’ advisory, programs, collection development, bibliographic access and inventory control, systems support or development, maintenance of web based services and staff training and development. May be assigned duties in children, youth and/or adult services. May be senior person in charge or exercise responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the library branch.

**DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

1. **Provides information, quick and in-depth reference and readers advisory services by:**
   a) providing direct customer service by answering library users’ queries;
   b) advising library users in their selection of material;
   c) assisting library users in the use of the catalogue and other information and research tools;
   d) requesting materials for library users;
   e) preparing readers advisory tools such as bibliographies, reviews and web links;
   f) assisting and instructing library users in the use of computers and other library equipment (e.g., microform readers, VendCard, etc.).
2. **Develops, implements, conducts and evaluates library programs by:**
   a) conducting tours of branch/department, collections and services;
   b) conducting instruction/orientation sessions for the public on the use of library resources;
   c) planning, promoting, preparing and presenting programs/workshops/group visits in the library and/or in the community;
   d) organizing programs with speakers/performers/authors;
   e) organizing displays in the library or in the community to promote library services;
   f) promoting library services to, and liaising with schools, community groups and other organizations.

3. **Develops and maintains library collections by:**
   a) selecting materials for addition to Library collections;
   b) recommending items for retention, disposal or replacement;
   c) recommending changes to the collection to reflect changing library user interests and needs;
   d) making recommendations for purchase to fill gaps in the collection;
   e) tracking budget allocations for collection funds.

4. **Provides bibliographic access and inventory control of all library collections by:**
   a) interpreting and applying current international standards and coding to the cataloguing and classifying of complex library materials;
   b) creating and maintaining bibliographic integrity and authority control in the library databases;
   c) adapting cataloguing conventions and processing procedures to enhance the functionality of the integrated library system.

5. **Administers integrated library systems (ILS) support by:**
   a) developing, testing, evaluating and implementing products and services to enhance the ILS;
   b) assisting and advising staff and library users in the analysis and resolution of problems;
   c) working with IT in researching, testing and integrating the ILS and licensed electronic resources for secured public desktops and staff desktops;
   d) developing specific database queries to extract specialized ILS reports.

6. **Develops and maintains the library website and staff intranet by:**
   a) promoting enhancements in virtual services including remote access to core library service;
   b) administrating and implementing web-based services including the administration of grant programs;
   c) developing online and print documentation to assist library users in effective utilization of virtual library services.
   d) providing troubleshooting support for web-based technologies to library staff and users.

7. **Provides staff training and development by:**
   a) coordinating training needs of employees by maintaining and updating the URPLO Training
Map;
b) researching training opportunities;
c) organizing and supporting staff training
d) recording training attendance;
e) evaluating training sessions and staff feedback;
f) tracking the URPLO training budget.

8. Maintains an up-to-date knowledge and expands awareness of library developments by:
   a) reading professional literature;
   b) monitoring and participating in electronic information forums;
   c) attending and participating in professional associations, training sessions, conferences and workshops.

9. May be senior person in charge or exercise responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the library branch.

10. Works in accordance with the provisions of applicable health and safety legislation and all City of URPLO corporate /departmental policies and procedures related to Occupational Health and Safety.

11. Performs other related duties consistent with the duties outlined above.
JOB TITLE: Public Service Assistant

UNION:

DEPARTMENT:

BRANCH:

DIVISION: Various

LOCATION: Various

SUPERVISOR’S JOB TITLE: Manager, Coordinator or designate

JOB SUMMARY (Overall Responsibilities)

Provides information, reference and readers advisory services in the Library and/or the community and/or mini-libraries, nursing homes and other locations. Provides circulation and page services in the Library and/or the community and/or mini-libraries, nursing homes and other locations. Performs routine collection maintenance duties. Promotes Library services. May be senior person in charge or exercises responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the library branch.

DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Time spent on the following activities may vary by location.

1. Provides information, reference and readers advisory services in the Library and/or the community and/or mini-libraries, nursing homes and other locations by:

   a) providing direct customer service by answering library users’ queries;
   b) advising library users in their selection of material;
   c) requesting materials for library users;
   d) assisting library users in the use of the catalogue and other information and research tools;
   e) assisting with the preparation of readers’ advisory tools;
   f) referring difficult queries to senior staff;
   g) assisting and instructing library users in the use of computers and other library equipment (e.g., microform readers, VendCard, etc.)
2. Provides circulation and page services in the Library and/or the community and/or mini-libraries, nursing homes and other locations by:
   a) checking library materials in and out by entering transaction records into the Library’s computer database using a keyboard and scanner;
   b) registering new/renewing borrowers;
   c) collecting system-generated fines and other fees from Library users;
   d) answering general inquiries by phone and in person, such as explaining Library circulation policies regarding overdue materials, reserving library materials and related policies;
   e) resolving complaints resulting from the above-mentioned circulation activities;
   f) providing paging duties.

3. Performs routine collection maintenance duties by:
   a) changing collection codes or status as required;
   b) recommending items for addition, retention, disposal or replacement, based on established policies and procedures.

4. Promotes Library services at the library and/or in the community by:
   a) conducting tours and orientation sessions on the use of Library resources;
   b) presenting programs;
   c) organizing adult programs with speakers/authors;
   d) creating and organizing displays in the Library or in the community to promote Library services.

5. May be senior person in charge or exercise responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the library branch.

6. **Works in accordance with the provisions of applicable health and safety legislation and all City of URPLO corporate/departmental policies and procedures related to Occupational Health and Safety.**

7. Performs other related duties consistent with the duties outlined above.
Appendix 13 – URPLO Statement on Core Values

**URPLO Core Values**

**Access for all:** We are committed to providing basic services to every person in URPLO free of charge, and to providing barrier-free facilities, resources and services.

**Accountability:** We are responsible for meeting the library service needs of the community in an efficient, effective and fiscally responsible manner.

**Dynamic Workforce:** We promote a stimulating work environment that recognizes and rewards staff creativity in serving the people of URPLO.

**Innovation:** We continuously review current practices, make improvements, leverage technology and create new standards of performance to drive service improvements.

**Intellectual Freedom:** We defend the right of library users to freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression as the basis of a democratic society.

**Love of Reading:** We nurture the joy of reading in people of all ages.

**Right to Privacy:** We respect and protect the privacy of our users.

**Service Orientation:** We excel in customer-driven service and respond to the diverse needs of the population of URPLO.

**Smart Community:** We believe that URPLO’s future economic and social prosperity depends on ensuring that all of our citizens are well informed and supported in their aspirations to learn throughout their lifetimes.
Appendix 14: Field Notes Sample

SB Field Note 2 - Naomi notes that the way the desk is positioned, she thinks many patrons often think the ref desk is the ‘reception’ desk and therefore they will walk all the way down the counter to this spot to ask a question that is circulation related. The whole set up of this desk needs to be noted – one continuous desk space with 3 circulation terminals and 1 information terminal (terminal indicates a place for a staff member to work). Circulation staff all stand at their terminals, whereas the reference staff member is always seated. And so the person at the ‘ref’ desk is often in the position of referring ‘circ’ related questions back to those staff members, leaving him/her available to answer the ref question that might happen.

MB Field Note 8 - Tom tells me that the herbal tea lady is in every day – and the seniors really like to “just come in and talk and she’s one of them – I talk to her almost every day” [But she doesn’t usually ask such personal questions such as what nationality are you?]

MB Field Note 9 - Conversation between Tom and Nancy – re sending paperbacks to other branches. They talk about a truck – what are ‘these books’ and what are ‘those books’ – keep these here – we’re doing something with graphic novels? I’ll get the paperbacks going. Do mysteries and romances go together? Yes, they do. [This is a back and forth interchange between Tom and Nancy.]

LB Field Note 22 - Conversation with Alicia re use of headsets – for use in the stacks – A notes that staff have refused to wear them – for h & s concerns and because they don’t want to be working that way. The question arises about whether or not they can be ‘forced’ to wear them. A does not know. She reports that the staff in another location wear them.