The Virtual Reference Handbook by Diane K. Kovacs provides a comprehensive overview of the skill set needed to provide virtual reference, as well as instruction and exercises to obtain these skills. Kovacs covers everything from keyboarding skills, to the ability to handle multiple users in a virtual reference environment, to building reference skills. This volume is better suited for those with limited exposure to reference and a low level of technological skills.

Virtual reference is used often to describe librarian-patron communication via the Internet, and can include asynchronous reference (e.g. e-mail, online forms) or synchronous reference (e.g. chat or instant messaging). Other terms, such as digital reference (a more encompassing term), or chat reference may also be used in the literature to refer to virtual reference. As this type of service has seen a proliferation in libraries in the last 10-15 years, reference librarians have had to pick up a new skill set. Ronan and Turner point out in their survey results published in Chat Reference: A SPEC Kit that “69% reported that staff require additional training, primarily in the use of the specific software and chatting techniques” (p. 10). Since this survey, various organizations and researchers have identified core competencies needed by virtual reference staff to provide an effective service. Luo provides a solid review of virtual reference competencies in the literature, and discusses them in the context of competencies identified through librarian interviews (2007). Competency lists allow for the development of training resources, such as Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime, Anywhere Answers by Hirko and Ross (2004). Also, articles have been published providing support for training in this area (Carter, 2002/03; Fagan and Desai, 2002/03; Westbrook, 2006, etc.). Kovacs covers the competencies as described in the literature, provides methods to obtain the required skills, and context through librarian interviews.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses the reference interview, highlights differences between face-to-face, chat, and email reference, and lists the technical, communications, and reference competencies to be discussed in the next three chapters. Chapter two covers technological competencies from basic keyboarding skills to more complex issues, such as the operation of chat software, and downloading and installing browser extensions. Chapter three focuses on communication competencies and addresses basic reference communication skills, and skills that are more specific to virtual reference, such as the ability to craft responses that communicate effectively with the patron. The last chapter discusses reference competencies associated more specifically with virtual reference, but most would also be applicable to face-to-face reference. As stated at every exercise, there is an online component to the book. However, after entering the URL provided, the instructions to “log in to area “chatrefbook” on www.kovacs.com” puzzled the reviewer as there appeared to be no area called “chatrefbook.”
The writing is characterized by an informal tone and contains typographical errors and ungrammatical sentences: “Because my experience is limited to specific kinds of patrons (university students and teachers in master or doctoral degrees) there is not much room left to make assumptions and the areas is clearly defined when the patrons identify themselves but! When I am talking about making assumptions, these are about the purpose of the research that can vary from a simple homework to a thesis or a field project and my answer will differ in depth based on this action,” (p. 9). The reviewer would like to have seen thorough editing of the volume.

Kovacs interviewed a number of librarians on virtual reference issues and throughout this volume provides the responses of each librarian to her interview questions. However, it would have been useful if themes had been developed from the responses and annotated with comments from the librarians, instead of simply providing the (sometimes rather lengthy) transcripts of these interviews. It is up to the reader to determine the importance of each response, which is made complicated by the fact that there are contradictory messages presented. The interview questions are often lengthy and sometimes biased to Kovacs’ views. Respondents generally either agree or disagree with her, leading to either repetitiveness or confusion for the reader.

Kovacs’ discussions of competencies are categorized by technological, communication, and reference competencies. It would have been useful if these categories had identified which competencies are specific to virtual reference, applied in reference but modified in virtual reference, or are general reference skills (see Lou, 2007). Also, it would have been preferable to have a separate section devoted to asynchronous virtual reference for the purpose of highlighting the different skills required, which currently get muddled up with the focus on synchronous reference. The reading was often broken-up by exercises, which could have been included as an appendix to allow for better flow. Lastly, the lack of solid examples of best practices through transcripts of virtual reference sessions stood out for a volume that is to cover techniques for virtual reference (for examples of transcripts see Fagan and Desai 2002/03; or Hirko and Ross, 2004).

The reviewer recommends this volume with hesitation. The recommendation stems from the fact that this is probably the most elaborate discussion of competencies required for the provision of virtual reference. It could assist reference librarians who are behind on their technical skills and are inexperienced with online communication skills, or perhaps library school students who could benefit from the extensive reading lists provided at the end of each chapter. The hesitation stems from the points discussed earlier, including organizational shortcomings, grammatical and typographical errors distracting for the reader, a poor implementation of interviewing techniques and presentation of this information, and a lack of sample virtual reference conversations.
Works Cited


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