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Reference Interview Analysis

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Introduction

As a long time library user I never considered how the reference librarian is trained to respond to queries. I had just assumed being a librarian was an intellectual branch of the service industry. This assumption was based on my own experiences in the food service industry where a positive attitude and common courtesy paid in tips. That being said, librarians, who are trained with the user in mind and are hopefully compensated for their training, are also supposed to exhibit proper reference practices. However, as observed in my reference interviews, two of these trained information professionals seem to take for granted that the search for information goes hand in hand with professional courtesy. What this analysis aims to discuss is common behavior traits that affects the outcome of the reference interview, the stages of the reference interview, and counter strategies that users implement to keep the interview going.

The most common behavioral trait I observed and most affected the outcome of the interview was non-verbal communication. Following Radford's (1998) study, he pointed out that "non-verbal immediacy behaviors that express approach or avoidance, level of involvement, positive and negative feelings...are crucial factors in decisions to initiate interaction with another person (p. 700)." During the interview with the public reference librarian, her cold and disinterested appearance indicated her lack of approachability and cued me in that she would not put a lot of effort into the search. In comparison, the academic librarian appeared friendly and interested by maintaining eye contact and conversational tone.

Another aspect of non-verbal communication is attitude. Attitudes, according to Munoz (1977), can reveal themselves in physical appearance, facial expressions, and

vocal qualities (p. 222). Gestures such as head nods and eye behavior can communicate encouragement or avoidance of approachability.

Novotny (2001) also discusses how “virtual chat services or instant messages are awkward due to the lack of visual cues such as body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice can lead to...miscommunication (p.115).” While the article relates how difficult it is to convey interest in chat, I beg to differ. Virtual reference librarians can show interest by practicing what is known as common courtesy. If the virtual reference librarian I chatted with took the time to introduce him/herself, acknowledged my name and verified my location the reference experience would have been pleasant and the search would have rendered better results.

After approachability, Bopp and Smith (2001) refer to “negotiating the question as the most important stage in the reference interview (p.54). The use of the open question can narrow down the scope and type of information” while carefully worded neutral questions can avoid offending the user but get a sense of what the materials are for. Unfortunately, two of the three referenced interviews I experienced, the librarians chose to skip this inquiry stage, one of which led to an unsuccessful search. In contrast, the academic librarian who did ask open question not only was successful in the search but progressed to the next stage by teaching me how to search the database. James Elborg (2002) best describes this reference “approach by implying that reference is a form of teaching, and that to maximize their educational effectiveness, academic librarians need to approach reference transactions as academic conferences where teaching and learning take place (p. 455).” Thus, the reference interview becomes a teachable moment where

“librarians become coaches and collaborators at the reference desk, people willing to “talk the talk” of research (p. 463).”

The finalizing stage of the reference interview is called closure. Nevertheless, this section will focus on the unprofessional strategies of negative closure. Catherine Ross and Patricia Dewdney (1998) discuss in their article how “factors strongly associated with underperformance is the unmonitored referral (p. 757)” This common negative closure strategy also experienced in my analysis included the librarian handing out a call number and pointing in the general direction of the source. The other negative closure strategy I experienced, which was offensive, is the implication that I should have done something else first before asking for reference help.

The last stage of closure is the follow-up question. None of the reference interviews conducted for this analysis included a follow-up to make sure I found what I was looking for. While in one case the reference librarian was unable to leave his desk and was later busy with another patron, the others were a continuation of their disinterest. Deficient follow-up also reveals my lack of persistence. Ross and Dewdney also discuss how users applied counter strategies during the reference interview to keep the interview alive, refusing to accept the answer the search provided, and restarting the interview process when the search failed (p.159). Rather than pursuing this aggressive path I chose the lesser one, like many other users, and just left unhappy with the results.

Conclusion

This analytical process reveals that proper reference practice involves caring about the needs of the user. Without that care, the reference interview will fail before it even starts. Aspects of approachability need to be considered especially in regards to non-verbal communication and how the librarians' attitude can foreshadow how the search will be conducted. Disappointment in regards to skipping the negotiating question reveals its importance to a successful search and reinforces how neutral questions should be asked to avoid offending the user.

The searching process, if handled properly, can become a time for the reference librarian to teach the user the finer aspects of research and create positive closure. Unfortunately, negative closure is the more common approach, which displays poor reference practice and poor social skills. Finally, the fact that users need to fight back by administering counter-strategies in order to engage surly librarians reflects badly on information professionals and the library itself. The knowledge profession is not about possessing information; it is about knowing how to teach others how to find information.

Reference Sources

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