Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Communication Breakdown: Librarian and Student Approaches to Virtual Reference Differ

A review of:
Walter, Virginia A. and Cindy Mediavilla. "Teens Are from Neptune, Librarians Are from Pluto: An Analysis of Online Reference Transactions." Library Trends 54.2 (2005): 209-227.

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Abstract

Objective – To evaluate the effectiveness of an online reference and referral service for students (primarily those in middle school and high school) seeking homework help.

Design – Analysis of 114 transcripts of reference transactions.

Setting – A centralized homework reference and tutor referral service provided on behalf of the California State Library by the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System.

Subjects – Virtual reference librarians at a large urban library system and middle and high school students in California.

Methods – One hundred fourteen virtual reference transactions recorded between October 12 and November 8, 2003 were evaluated against the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." Secondly, the transcripts were subjected to discourse analysis.

Main results

Performance of virtual reference librarians vis-à-vis RUSA guidelines
In the majority of cases, there was some evidence that librarians communicated clearly (110 out of 114 transactions). In 78 cases, it appeared that a librarian was available quickly, and in 92 of the transactions a friendly greeting was given. What was striking, however, was that in a clear majority of cases, some of the classic reference interview strategies were not employed. In 100 or more cases each, the

following strategies were not observed: repeating or paraphrasing the question; helping to interpret the question; verifying mutual understanding; asking if the question has been answered; asking if the student needs more information. Furthermore, in 75 cases librarians did not probe for further information to clarify the question, while in 87 cases they did not check that information had been clearly understood.

Possibly related to these findings, the researchers felt that the transcripts revealed "a conviction that homework questions are not the proper content for reference transactions" (222). In addition, librarians were found to be frequently too quick to refer students to a tutor, when a query might have been better answered as a reference question.

Findings of discourse analysis
In general, the virtual reference librarians used impersonal, formal language to "reinforce the professional's superior position vis-à-vis the help-seeker" (217). There were repeated attempts by the students to interject a lighter or warmer tone (using humour, emoticons, informal language, introducing a personal note, etc.). These attempts were rarely reciprocated, with librarians continuing to use impersonal language, including stock messages such as:

- "we are experiencing a very busy time right now," (217); or,
- "I am going to send you a page which will give you some help with your homework. After we disconnect this session, click on this link and follow the instructions to be connected with a tutor. Please do not click on any links on this page until after we have disconnected" (217).

In several cases librarians were preoccupied with defining their roles—for example, specifying that they could give reference

help but not advice. In all, the distancing mechanisms used by librarians, combined with occasional inaccurate referrals and technical problems with the software, were seen to create an enormous potential for frustration on the part of the student.

Conclusions – The most important implication of the study was that librarians and students were worlds (or planets) apart in their approach to the reference interaction. While "teens attempted to create meaning by recreating the chat discourse environment in which they were most at home", librarians "tried to create meaning in a parallel discourse environment that duplicated as much as possible the standard impersonal protocols of a face-to-face reference counter" (223). One suggested way to alleviate the disconnect between librarians and students was to involve students in the planning of the services. For now, however, the authors conclude that "teens are from Neptune, librarians are from Pluto. Better services would result if they could meet somewhere closer together" (224).

Commentary

The authors note that they did not have the opportunity to follow up with the librarians, nor did they have access to other virtual reference transactions, such as queries by adult patrons, for comparison. There was a suggestion that reference librarians viewed questions by students as 'second class' reference questions. Follow-up interviews and a comparison of adult and student transactions might have clarified the librarians' attitudes in this regard.

In addition, further information would have been useful on several points: did the 114 transcripts (originally 115) represent a sample of a larger number of student virtual reference transactions, or were they, as it appears, all that were collected within the

time period specified? How did the total number of student queries compare to queries from other age groups? Also, somewhat more detailed information on the virtual reference librarians, such as the number of staff responding and their qualifications, would have been of interest.

As the study was limited to a single location, it is possible that the widespread deviation from the RUSA guidelines was the result of a localized training or planning deficiency. Also, a follow-up survey or interviews with students themselves might have given a more precise sense of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service offered.

While limited in scope, the study presents its evidence clearly and uses established guidelines to evaluate the reference transactions. The study offers useful

insights into the differences that can emerge between adult librarian and teen/student patron in the virtual reference arena. As we look forward, it is to be hoped that the unique opportunity afforded by the virtual reference transaction record (the ability to preserve the transaction in its entirety) will prove a rich source for analysis aimed at improving reference service.

Work Cited

"Guideline for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." <u>Reference & User Services Quarterly</u> 43.1 (2003): 43-7.