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Reference Transaction Report

Part 1

Reference Contact Point:

The initial contact was made by locating the well-marked Reference Desk, and selecting the professional librarian from the two individuals present. The area was well marked with proper use of signage (RUSA Guidelines, 2004, section 1). During the length of the transaction, the library appeared to be experiencing heavy patron volume.

Question Asked:

Can you help me find book agents?

Reference Interview and techniques:

The transaction began with a delay commonly associated with high traffic as the librarian assisted the patrons individually in a queue; however, the librarian (designated “Librarian A”) failed to acknowledge my presence, which is an element of establishing approachability (RUSA Guidelines, 2004, Section 1.3) even if you are already helping other patrons. Two additional patrons joined the queue during my wait, which appeared consistent with the traffic patterns observed prior to beginning the transaction. After the length of the line had grown, several librarians approached the Reference Desk with offers of assistance to help reduce the individual wait times.

One of the new librarians (designated “Librarian B”), initiated our conversation with “eye contact,” moving towards me, and directly addressing me (Radford, 1998). She initiated a reference interview using several open-ended questions (Cassell and Hiremath, 2006, p.19); such as, “Why do you need this information?” and “What kind of book are you trying to publish?” My answers allowed her to conclude that Librarian A would be more qualified to assist in the matter as Librarian A had previous experience in publishing. I was accompanied by Librarian B to the Reference Desk and Librarian B provided a brief outline of my needs to Librarian A. Librarian A informed Librarian B that she was currently occupied with two references interviews and was unavailable. Librarian A explained that she was awaiting the return of one patron and was assisting another online. The conversation was held around me and about me, but failed to acknowledge me. Although Librarian A’s intentions may have differed, the effect of this behavior could have “encouraged the user to abort the transaction voluntarily” (Ross and Dewdney, 1998). I indicated my ability to wait until Librarian A was available, prompting Librarian A to acknowledge me, for the first time, and pleasantly apologize for the wait. This act established availability (Radford, 1998).

After a few moments, Librarian A continued the transaction with me by using Neutral Questions (Dervin and Dewdney, 1986) asking “Please explain the situation to me.” And “What have you already found?” I informed her that I had tried one book, but that the book was outdated and lacked specific information regarding literary agents that dealt with fantasy novels. She appeared to use “sense-making” strategies through her assessment of the situation, my gap in knowledge, and my desired use for the information (Dervin and Dewdney, 1986). She noted a book title and catalog number, then requested that librarian B guide me to the location. I thanked

her for their assistance and indicated my willingness to examine the resource. I remained in the reference section as I examined the book for the desired information.

While I was examining the provided resource, both librarians conducted follow-up transaction (RUSA Guidelines, 2004, Section 5). Librarian A conducted her follow-up first, appearing after she had attended to the previous reference transactions. She sought my opinion of the material and whether it was adequate. I responded that the material provided information regarding literary agents and publishers, but wasn't very user-friendly and didn't list agents according to genera, specifically with Fantasy and/or Adventure genre. She indicated that she would search the internet for additional information and departed. Librarian B conducted her follow-up shortly thereafter and asked if the material was sufficient. Librarian A returned and indicated that she had little success finding information that specific, but suggested an additional book that might be helpful. At this point, all parties appeared to determine that the transaction was concluded.

Outcome:

At the conclusion of the transaction, the best resource provided was the "Writer's Market 2010". Unfortunately, the resource did not provide the specific information I was searching for; however, I am satisfied with the effort of both librarians and would not argue that the "Librarian [attempted] to get [me] to accept more easily found information", as suggested in the article entitled "Negative Closure" (Ross and Dewdney, 1998). On the contrary, I would willingly return for assistance from either librarian because I felt that they put real effort into my question (Turner and Durrance).

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Part 2

Virtual Reference Service Description:

The library homepage gives a link titled “Get Help Now.” This page offers several methods for contacting the Reference Desk: links to various research guides, access to IM and Chat clients, a generic email address, and a phone number for the Reference Desk. The Chat services were well-marked and easy to find, with a conversation box located within the webpage and not requiring any login. These items combined made this page both informative and easy to navigate, as suggested by the RUSA Guidelines for making virtual reference “approachable.” (2004, Section 1.8).

Question Asked:

Can you help me find some articles about Adolf Hitler?

Reference Interview and Techniques:

Shortly after entering my question into the chat box, I was greeted and asked a closed ended question “are you looking for biographical books?” (Cassell and Hiremath, 2006, p. 19) I clarified that any resource would suffice and that the theme of the research was “lust for power”. I stated that his childhood experiences might be an excellent source of determining those things that shaped his character. The Librarian offered an unmonitored referral (Nilsen, 2005) by suggesting that I utilize JSTOR, and provided a URL to the university electronic resources. I left the conversation box open for thirty minutes, but there was no follow-up or closure following the referral. (Nilsen, 2005).

I concluded that JSTOR was not yielding the desired results, but was avoiding reinitiating the conversation with the library for additional information. I eventually continued the conversation within the same chat box as the previous transaction. I stated that I wasn't able to find what appropriate resources in JSTOR or Galileo, and asked if they could recommend something else. This was the first counter-strategy described in the article titled *Negative Closure* by Ross and Dewdney (1998). After clarifying that I was the patron searching for articles about Hitler, there was a six minute break in conversation without any reference to how (or if) they were addressing my question (Ronan, 2003). Upon returning, they suggested that I try Academic Search Complete, with 'Hitler and childhood' in the search bar. The librarian stated that this should produce an article titled "Who was Hitler." I feel that the lack of incorporating the search term "power" many have significantly reduced the relevant results. After the guided search, I mentioned that I was having technical problems with this particular article; however, the librarian did not respond to my concerns, and that was the last I heard from them. Just like the first time, they left no follow-up or closure. The experience of a 'disappearing librarian' was discussed in the article titled "Negative Closure" (Ross and Dewdney, 1998). After leaving the conversation box open for another thirty minutes I determined the conversation closed.

Outcome:

The eventual referral to "Who was Hitler" was a good article, but presented technological barriers due to the resolution resulting in an image too large to print out on 8½ x11 paper. The portions of the article that were legible did appear to be helpful. Overall, I was unsatisfied with this transaction, as the person appeared unhelpful and uninterested in my needs, and was unresponsive when I discussed my technical difficulties with this article.

Part 3

Room for Improvement:

By far, the transaction I was the least satisfied with was the virtual reference transaction. What is not shown in the paper is that I attempted this transaction two previous times with different libraries, and this was the longest and most helpful transaction. If I were to choose a word that best describes how to improve these experiences it would be ‘dialog.’

During the course of this virtual transaction, had the librarian engaged in an interview with more depth, provided a referral based on sufficient information, and followed-up the interview, as described in the Nilsen article, the experience would have been far more positive. These all amount to quality and quantity of communication. The lack of communication led me to feel that they were only interested in supplying a referral to get rid of me.

Ronan’s article emphasizes the important of bridging the communication handicap presented in the virtual world, and offers several options for a more positive virtual interaction: sharing your name, making comments about the conversation, using friendly greetings, even using an automated greeting to let the user know that they are in a queue. These are common practices during face-to-face interactions, but become vital when the conversation lacks the use of body language. In summation, my experiences and coursework have provided the compelling argument that the foundation to a successful virtual reference transaction is communication, both quantitative and qualitative.

References

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