

Virtual and Live Reference Interactions

Jenny Olivera

San Jose State University

Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts a face-to-face reference interaction with a virtual reference interaction, and discusses whether virtual interactions are as successful as live interactions. Compared are the social interactions, including the personal connections made with the librarians, and the resources the librarians used.

Introduction

Reference services have been around for as long as the modern library. Virtual reference services, using chat, email, or instant messaging, are fairly new. While most aspects of the reference interaction, such as interviewing the patron, search skills and knowledge of the library's physical and electronic collections, can translate over to a virtual setting, visual cues such as body language and expressions are missing, as is the immediacy of a face-to-face interaction. However, this does not mean that virtual interactions are less successful than live ones. This paper compares and contrasts two reference interactions, one face-to-face and one virtual, that deal with the same information need. For my information need, I wanted examples of women being strong as women, not taking the roles of men, in a patriarchal society.

Interactions

I opened the face-to-face reference interaction by saying that I wanted to find examples of women's strengths in a male dominated society. The librarian hesitated, and then chuckled nervously and told me "Well, you've stumbled into a public library." He explained that in order to search the catalogue he needed a subject heading that the catalogue used, and that, as a public library, their information was going to be very broad-brush and scatter-shot. His body language made him seem apologetic and hesitant, and reluctant to search on the topic, even as he tried different subjects in the catalogue. Throughout the reference interaction, his tone of voice clearly conveyed that he thought he wouldn't be able to help me. When I asked about magazine or periodical databases,

he physically drew back a little and hesitated, then explained that they only stocked popular magazines, and while they did have Infotrac, it was only about half full text and if I found a citation the library wouldn't be likely to have the magazine with the full article. After taking me to the section of the library that had books on feminism, he told me to come back to the desk if I had any more thoughts or questions, but seemed eager to leave. My interaction with him lasted about five minutes.

For the virtual reference, I used my local library's instant messaging service. For my opening query I typed "Hello - I was wondering if you could help me with a research subject. I'm looking for examples of women's strength in a male-dominated society. Can you help me find some?" After a minute or two, the librarian replied by introducing herself and saying she was "glad to help." She asked me what sort of field I was looking in and gave me a few examples, and asked if I would like magazine articles. She then asked me what kind of strength I was referring to, and I typed back that I was still trying to narrow down my subject, but I wanted examples of women being strong as women, either behind the scenes or as leaders. She replied that I might get some good ideas by searching in one of their databases, and offered to help me do this. Based on the wording of her responses she seemed very friendly and eager to help. She occasionally used casual speech, such as "Let me do a quick search to get ya goin'." She did a search for me, and told me which database she was searching and what keywords she used, and then gave me a link to one of the articles she found. It was getting close to the time the IM service ended, and she told me that if she was unable to answer my question that I should feel free to call the Information Desk or that I could leave my email and she could send me some links the next day. The IM session lasted about twenty minutes.

Comparisons

The virtual interaction lasted about four times longer than the face-to-face interaction, mostly due to the lag time inherent in chat interactions. Speaking face-to-face is much quicker than typing and waiting for the other person to read and respond. One of the drawbacks to virtual interactions is that neither person knows if the other person is gathering information, has walked away from the computer, or is merely a slow typist. On the other hand, both the librarian and the patron can take advantage of that inherent lag to better formulate their responses. Verbal pauses can be awkward, but brief pauses are expected in virtual interactions. Gauging how busy the librarian is in virtual interactions is also impossible. In my face-to-face interaction, I could immediately see that no one else was at the information desk, but with the virtual interaction I could only send my query and hope the librarian was not overwhelmed. Because of the time it took her to respond to my initial query, I wondered if she was helping another patron, or if she had stepped away from the desk.

In both interactions, the librarian drew upon the sources that were the easiest to access. In the face-to-face interaction, the librarian searched the catalogue and then took me to the stacks, and didn't talk about the electronic databases until I mentioned them. At that point he suggested I access the databases from home because of the cost of printing at the library. During the virtual interaction, the librarian suggested searching one of the databases that can be accessed through the library's Web site. Books were not mentioned, although our interaction was cut short by the closing time of the library's IM service.

One thing these two interactions illustrated is that the type of interaction does not determine the success. Lindbloom, Yackle, Burhans, Peters, and Bell say that “in the electronic format, the librarian’s skills are in the spotlight” (2006, p. 14), but based on my experiences, I would say that this is no less true in a face-to-face interaction. As Tenopir points out, both interactions rely on good conversational skills and a good answer to the question (2006, p. 34). Lindbloom et al. goes on to say of virtual interactions:

The success of the online reference transaction depends on the librarian’s abilities.

The skill to correctly interpret the client’s question is the first step. Next the practitioner must quickly determine a search strategy, locate an accurate answer using Internet resources and online databases; and share the results in a timely fashion. The professional must convey all of these components in a friendly, helpful manner without the assistance of body language or spoken cues (2006, p. 14).

All of these skills are also needed in face-to-face interactions, the only difference being the lack of visual cues. This lack increases chance of misinterpreting the patron’s emotions and mood and leaves the librarian with only the words the patron chooses to type with which to gauge the success of the interaction. However, this lack can also be a benefit, since the librarian doesn’t have the added nervousness of being physically watched by the patron. Because of the lack of tone of voice and body language, some hesitancy and uncertainty can be masked in a virtual setting.

Something that’s easy to miss in a virtual interaction is a personal connection between the librarian and the patron (Janes, 2006, p. 76). However, the librarian I spoke with virtually was adept enough at using text to convey interest and an easy, friendly

manner that the lack of visual cues wasn't a problem. In contrast, during the face-to-face reference interaction the visual cues of body language, expression, and the tone of voice distanced the librarian, and were a barrier to creating a personal connection. Virtual interactions are not necessarily more impersonal than live, face-to-face interactions, and live interactions do not always have much personal connection.

Conclusion

The lack of visual cues in virtual interactions can be an obstacle, but can be compensated for with word choice and "representations of nonverbal clues" (Tenopir, 2006, p. 34). This lack of cues can also be potentially beneficial, because it can allow hesitancy to be masked. However, virtual interactions typically take longer than face-to-face, with pauses in between responses, and the patron, as well as the librarian, can only guess what is happening on the other end.

Creating a personal connection in live, face-to-face interactions is easier than in virtual ones. Visual cues provide both positive and negative feedback (Tenopir, 2006, p. 34), and the interaction is more immediate. However, this does not mean that all face-to-face interactions are more personal, or that all virtual interactions are impersonal. The success of reference interactions, both virtual and face-to-face, is determined by the skill of the librarian.

References

- Janes, J. (2006, August). Internet librarian. *American Libraries*, p. 76.
- Lindbloom, M., Yackle, A., Burhans, S., Peters, T., & Bell, L. (2006). New roles for librarians. *The Reference Librarian*, 93, 3-22.
- Tenopir, C. (2006, March 1). What chat transcripts reveal. *Library Journal*, p.34.