Using Transaction Logs to Study the Effectiveness of Librarian Behaviors on User Satisfaction in a Virtual Setting: A Mixed-Method Approach

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ABSTRACT

Chat reference is becoming more common and it is important to be able to effectively judge user satisfaction with the results they receive. The behaviors the reference librarian should use to ensure that users are satisfied with chat reference sessions must also be determined. In this paper, the authors indicate that many of these behaviors could be mapped to the virtual environment with great success. The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain the methodology, which is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, to allow others to adapt this methodology to their own situations.

Keywords: Chat, Chat Reference, Librarian Behaviors, Translation Logs, User Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

In this research project, online transaction logs were obtained from the Southeastern Florida Library Information Network. At the time of the reference interview neither the librarians nor the users knew that these transactions logs would be used in a research project, so all the data gathered was in an unobtrusive manner. In an article in Reference and User Studies Quarterly (Winter 2008), the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers (2004) were tested against the transcripts to see if the behaviors for face-to-face reference could be used in a virtual environment. Our research indicated that many of these behaviors could be mapped to the virtual environment with great success. This paper describes and explains the methodology’s mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Successful reference interview between patrons and reference staff has been emphasized consistently in previous literature as an important factor of reference success. Gers and Seward (1985) demonstrated that reference librarians’ verbal and nonverbal communication skills are very important in delivering effective reference services. This has brought a great attention on reference interview and staff training to teach effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

From this research and background, the Reference and User Studies Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association has developed the behavioral Guidelines, known as the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers. It delineated behaviors that can lead to an effective reference interview. A handful of research studies consistently showed that the use of the behaviors in the Guidelines is positively associated with reference success (Gatten & Radcliff, 2001; Saxton, 2002). Thus, the Guideline has been recognized as a useful staff training and performance evaluation tool. In June 2004, RUSA revised the original 1996 Guidelines to help librarians who provide virtual reference interviews.

To date not a lot is known about the nature of virtual reference interview. For example,

- How do reference librarians interact with their patron in virtual reference settings?
- Are they similar to traditional reference services or different?
- Are the verbal and nonverbal cues in virtual references similar to physical interactions?
- What are the model behaviors that could lead the virtual reference service more successful?

Among studies that looked into the Guidelines, Gatten and Radcliff (2001) evaluated the effectiveness of the staff training of the 1996 RUSA Guideline in physical reference service settings. Their study was conducted using an unobtrusive observational method where proxies approached the librarians and recorded the occurrence of the behavior and rated their satisfaction with the answers. This type of research can be much easily done in virtual reference setting. Librarians can easily access the interview transaction transcripts that recorded reference interview word by word along with co-browsing process. So far, to our knowledge, there has been little research that assessed the virtual reference interview using this easily available observational data.

The RUSA Behavioral Guidelines are basically an extended version of the 1996 edition. Recognizing the increasing need for a guideline that help the staff who provide digital reference, RUSA revised the guideline. Maintaining the original five-component structure, the revised Guidelines categorized each of the five areas into three aspects: general setting, physical setting, in remote access settings. The important behaviors are classed in 5 categories:

- **Approachability** includes behaviors that ensure easy access to the reference staff by removing/lowering the barrier to personal assistance. (Examples: Making signs visible, making the presence of virtual reference visible, making the eye-contact or word contact with the patrons)
- **Interest** includes behaviors that show librarians’ interest to the patron’s reference questions so that patrons could state their questions without hesitance. (Examples: Focus attention to the patron, maintaining and re-establishing “word” contact, making question scope visible and clear)
- **Listening / Inquiring** includes behaviors that ensure good listening and questioning skills so that librarians can find out patrons’ real information needs, which sometimes are buried or unclear. (Examples: communicating receptive cordial ways, use proper written language, using adequate probing, rephrasing questions for adequate understanding of the questions)
- **Searching** includes effective search skills and related behaviors during information
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